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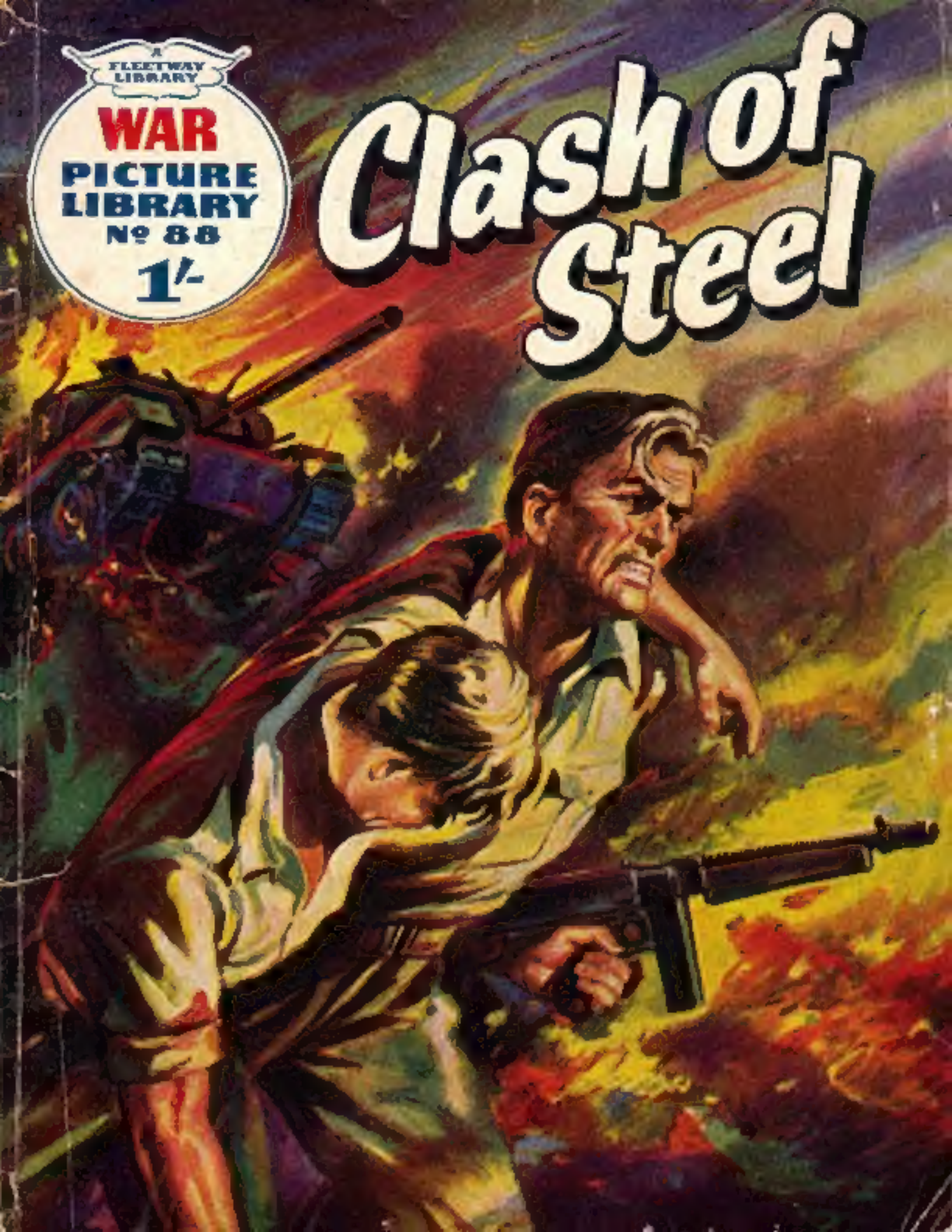

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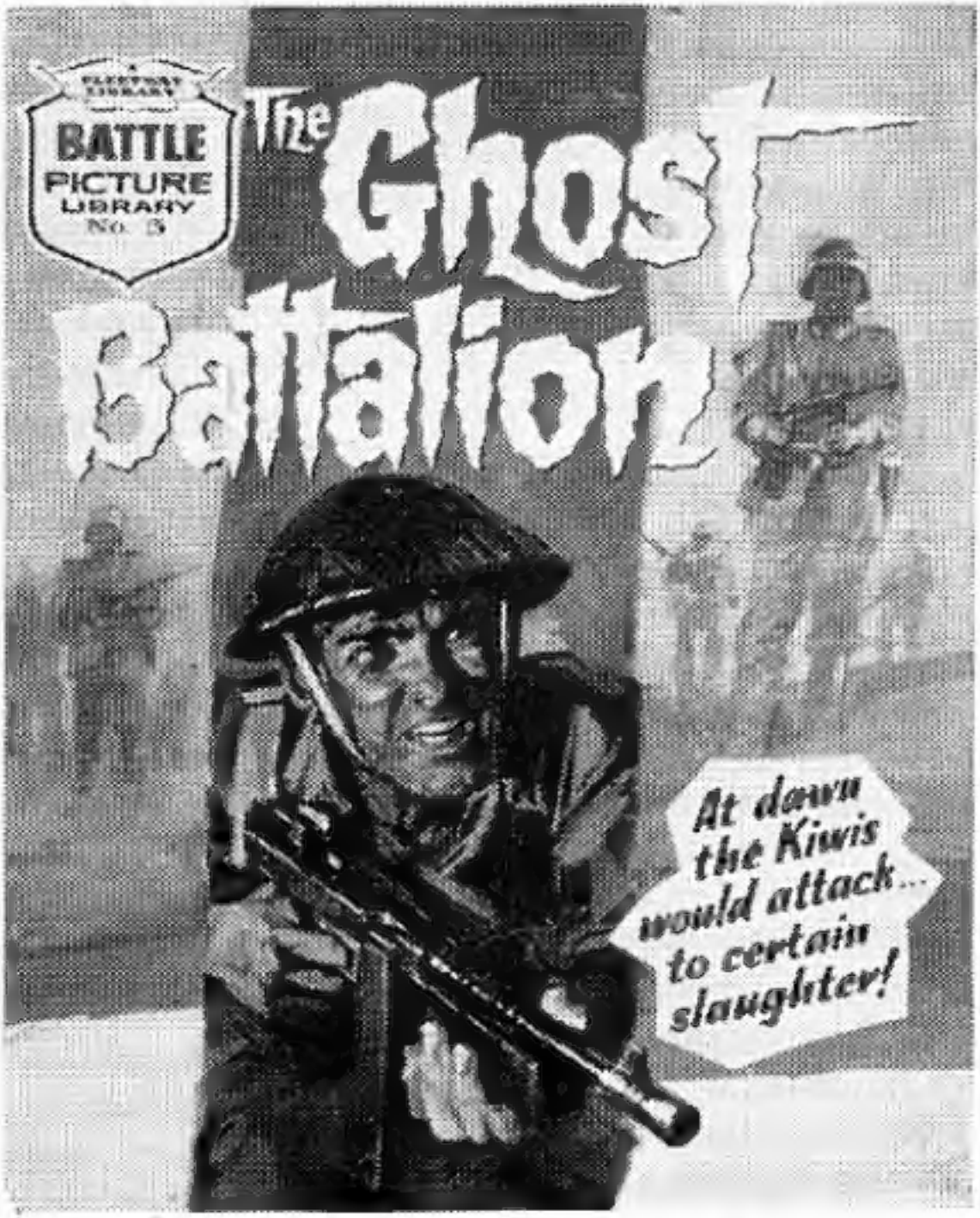

TWO Dramatic, All-action Issues Every Month

CLASH of STEEL

LIKE PONDEROUS PRIMEVAL MONSTERS, THE TANKS LURCHED MENACINGLY ACROSS THE BATTLEFIELD. BUT ONE ACCURATE ENEMY SHOT COULD TRANSFORM A POWERFUL FIGHTING VEHICLE INTO A BLAZING STEEL COFFIN FOR ITS CREW . . .

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Chapter 1. 'C' DRAFT

A VOICE WITH A BELLOW LIKE THE GUN IN A CRUSADER'S TURRET . . . A FACE AS SHARP IN PROFILE AS A HATCHET . . . EYES AS HARD AS PEBBLES . . . AND A BACK SO STRAIGHT YOU EXPECTED HIM TO TWANG WHEN HE MOVED . . . THAT JUST ABOUT SUMMED UP SERGEANT BLUNDEN, MARTINET . . .

HE LOOKED IN A JAUNDICED MANNER AT A SQUAD OF NEWLY KITTED-OUT CONSCRIPTS AT THE ROYAL ARMOURED CORPS TRAINING-DEPOT WHERE HE WAS ON THE PERMANENT STAFF . . .

REMEMBER, SNAP TO ATTENTION WHEN AN N.C.O. SPEAKS TO YOU AND ANSWER PROMPT! YOU—THE RIGHT-HAND MAN— WHAT'S YOUR NAME AND WHAT DID YOU DO IN CIVVY STREET?

LAWSON, SERGEANT. I WAS A MECHANIC IN A GARAGE.

BLUNDEN JERKED HIS HEAD AT THE NEXT FOUR MEN IN RAPID SEQUENCE. HIS GLANCE SEEMED TO SPEAR EACH ONE IN TURN...
YOU — YOU — YOU — AND YOU! NAME AND CIVVY OCCUPATION?
DALZIEL — STEEL-WORKER.
KELLY — SELF-EMPLOYED. I OWNED A HOUSE DECORATING BUSINESS.
HOYLE — BUS CONDUCTOR.
ER — MY NAME IS —

BLUNDEN'S VOICE EXPLODED IN A STRIDENT SNARL. TIMID BY NATURE, THE LITTLE FELLOW WHO WAS FIFTH FROM THE RIGHT NEARLY FOLDED UP WITH FRIGHT...
AS YOU WERE! SNAP TO ATTENTION, I SAID — NOT SHUFFLE! STAND UP STRAIGHT! PRESS THOSE SHOULDERS BACK! ALL RIGHT, LET'S HAVE IT — NAME AND CIVVY OCCUPATION!
C-C-CLARENCE, S-SERGEANT-

AGAIN THAT GARGANTUAN VOICE, BATTERED AT THE NERVES OF THE DIMINUTIVE RECRUIT...
NOT YOUR FIRST NAME, YOU DOLT! YOUR SURNAME!
C-CLARENCE IS MY SURNAME, SERGEANT. AND BEFORE I WAS CALLED UP I WORKED ON A LITERARY MAGAZINE. I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE POETRY SUPPLEMENT —

BLUNDEN CAST HIS EYES TO HIGH HEAVEN. HIS HARSH FACE REGISTERED ENORMOUS SARCASM AND DISGUST...

A POET! WHAT THE HECK ARE THEY PITCH-FORKING INTO THE ARMY NOW? COR, THEY MUST BE SCRAPING THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL!

WHAT A HOLY TERROR! MAYBE THAT'S WHAT A SERGEANT HAS TO BE. BUT I CAN'T SEE THERE'S ANY CALL TO JEER AT A BLOKE BECAUSE OF HIS CIVVY STREET JOB.

THE N.C.O. WENT ON WITH HIS ABRUPT QUESTIONNAIRE AND THEN ADDRESSED THE SQUAD WITH BLISTERING CONTEMPT...

YOU LOOK A PROPER SHOWER TO ME — THE WHOLE LOT OF YOU. IT'S AS WELL YOU'LL BE RIDING IN TANKS. IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS BEFORE THEY MECHANISED THE CAVALRY, ANY SELF-RESPECTING HORSES WOULD'VE SHIED THE MINUTE THEY CLAPPED EYES ON YOU — AND THAT'S A FACT!

HAVING DELIVERED THAT IRONIC PLEASANTRY FOR HIS OWN ENJOYMENT, HE PROCEEDED TO INTRODUCE THE ROOKIES TO THE UNGENTLE ART OF SQUARE-BASHING...

LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT! SWING THOSE ARMS! YOU, THERE! THE PEN-PUSHING POET! KEEP THE STEP! WHAT THE DEVIL'S THE MATTER WITH YOU, MAN? ARE THOSE ARMY BOOTS TOO HEAVY FOR LITTLE FEET?

LATER, THE MEN OF BLUNDEN'S SQUAD COMPARED IMPRESSIONS. THE COMMENTS OF FIVE OF THEM WERE PRETTY REPRESENTATIVE. THOSE FIVE WERE MATT LAWSON, ERNIE HOYLE, BILL DALZIEL, DAVE KELLY, ANTHONY CLARENCE . . .
HE'S A TARTAR, AND NO MISTAKE.
STONE THE FLIPPING CROWS, HE AIN'T HUMAN!
A NASTY BIT OF WORK, IF YOU ASK ME!
THAT'S PUTTING IT MILDLY!
HE— HE SCARES ME . . .

KELLY BECAME AWARE OF A TRUCULENT SCRUTINY . . . FROM DALZIEL — ALREADY NICKNAMED "RAZZLE-DAZZLE." DALZIEL HAD AN INBORN DISLIKE OF FOREMEN, MANAGERS, EMPLOYERS — AND NOW, SERGEANTS . . .
IT MUST BE A CHANGE FOR YOU TO GET BAWLED AT, KELLY. THEM AS WORKED FOR YOU WOULD GET A LAUGH OUT OF IT.
YOU THINK SO? LET ME TELL YOU I WAS LIKED AND RESPECTED BY THE MEN I EMPLOYED! I PAID THEM WELL, AND TREATED THEM WELL!

AS THE DAYS WENT BY, BLUNDEN SUCCEEDED IN MAKING HIMSELF LOATHED OR FEARED BY ALL MEMBERS OF HIS SQUAD . . .
TAKE A FIRM GRIP ON THAT STEN, MAN! HOLD IT LIKE YOU'VE BEEN TAUGHT! IT'S A LETHAL WEAPON, NOT A PERISHING FOUNTAIN-PEN! IT'S FOR KILLING GERMANS, NOT FOR WRITING POETRY TO 'EM!
THIS BRUTE SEEMS TO REVEL IN THE THOUGHT OF KILLING. HOYLE WAS RIGHT. HE'S NOT HUMAN . . .

THE MAN WAS A BORN TYRANT, HIS TONGUE A LASH SCOURGING ALL WHO WERE HIS SUBORDINATES. BUT TONY CLARENCE WAS THE CHIEF VICTIM OF THE SADISTIC STREAK IN HIM . . .
DON'T MAKE ME DRIVE THIS THING, SERGEANT. I'LL GO TO PIECES. I KNOW I WILL. IT'S A— A KIND OF PHOBIA WITH ME. I TRIED MORE THAN ONCE ON MY FATHER'S CAR, BUT I WAS HOPELESS.
YOU'LL TAKE YOUR TURN AS DRIVER, SAME AS THE REST. NOW GET IN THERE OR I'LL CLAP YOU ON A FIZZER AND RUN YOU UP BEFORE THE COMMANDING OFFICER.

UNDER THE COMPULSION OF THAT HECTORING VOICE, THE LITTLE ROOKIE CLIMBED NERVOUSLY BEHIND THE CONTROLS OF THE IRONCLAD. IT WAS A NINETEEN-TON CRUSADER, WITH A 340 BRAKE-HORSE-POWER ENGINE . . .
ALL RIGHT, HALF-PINT! YOU'VE BEEN SHOWN WHAT TO DO. GET CRACKING!
BLUNDEN'S A SHOCKER! EVEN WHEN THE SQUAD'S SPLIT UP LIKE WE ARE NOW, WE FIVE HAVE TO GET LUMBERED WITH HIM! POOR TONY CLARENCE — IT'S HARDEST ON HIM.

TONY CLARENCE LICKED HIS LIPS FURTIVELY AS HE EYED THE DIALS OF THE FORWARD BULKHEAD. HE STARTED UP THE ENGINE, AND HIS TREMULOUS HANDS FLUTTERED IN A HESITANT FASHION OVER THE CONTROLS . . .
LISTEN TO HIM GRATING THOSE GEARS! I DON'T LIKE THIS. HE'S A BUNDLE OF NERVES. IF YOU ASK ME, HE SHOULDN'T BE DRIVING SOLO YET.
NOBODY'S ASKING YOU, LAWSON, SO SHUT YOUR TRAP!

THEY GOT OFF TO A SHAKY START, WITH BLUNDEN YAMMERING AT CLARENCE AND THEREBY ADDING TO HIS JUMPINESS. HALFWAY DOWN THE STEEP DESCENT IN THE ROAD, THE TRAINEE-DRIVER COMPLETELY MUFFED A GEAR-CHANGE . . .

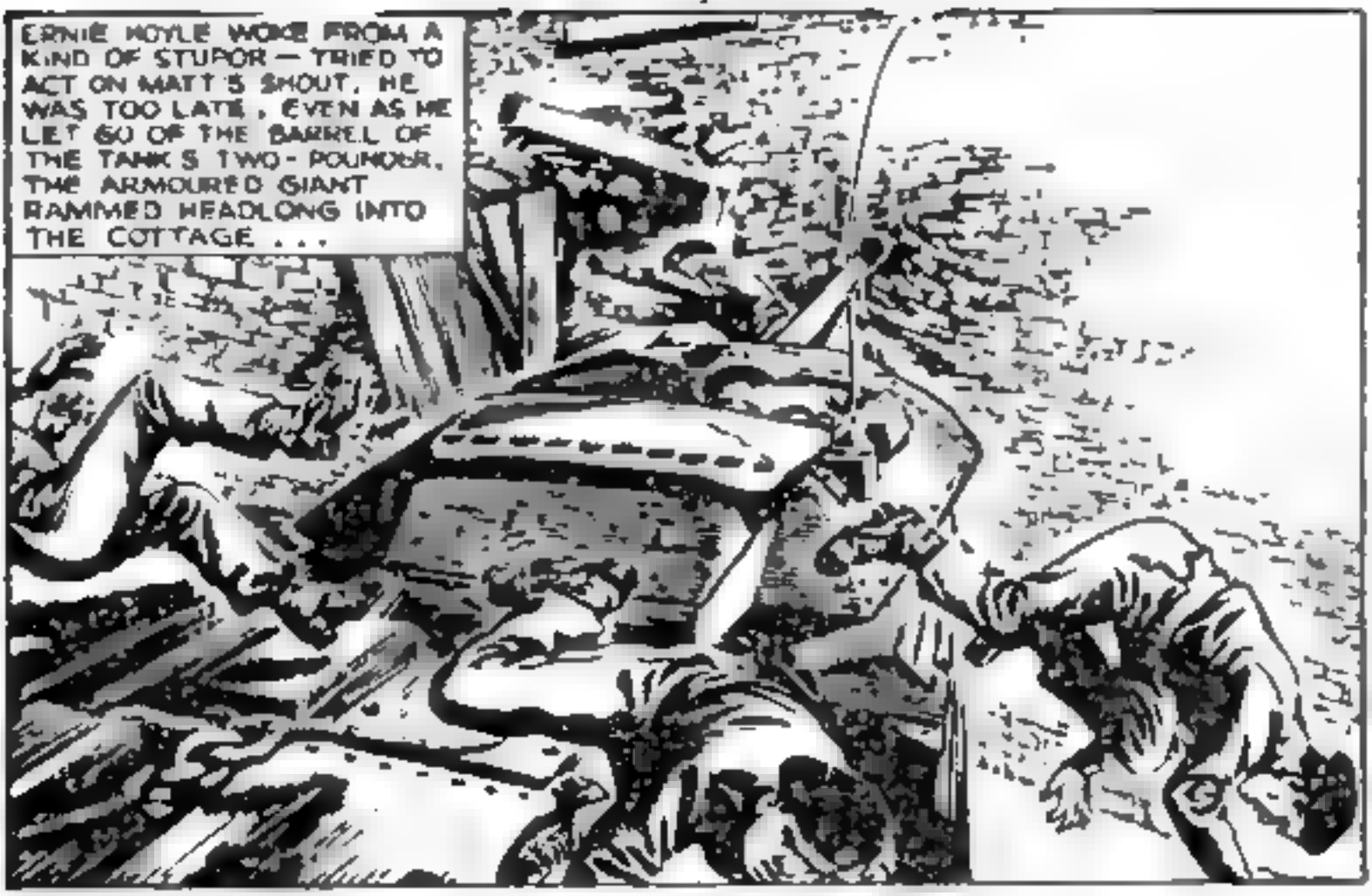
DON'T LEAVE HER IN NEUTRAL, YOU FOOL! SLAM THAT LEVER HOME OR SHE'LL RUN AWAY WITH YOU!

BLUNDEN WAS ROARING LIKE A BULL AND FLUSTERED, TONY CLARENCE LOST CONTROL. IN FRONT OF THE CRUSADER'S CUPOLA ERNIE HOYLE BECAME TRANSFIXED WITH ALARM . . .

YOU UNDERSIZED MISFIT! GET A GRIP ON YOURSELF!

THE CRUSADER'S TOP ENGINE-SPEED ON LEVEL GROUND WAS TWENTY-SEVEN MILES AN HOUR. BUT IT WAS TOUCHING CLOSE ON FORTY AS IT HURTLED INTO A BEND AT THE FOOT OF THE ROAD AND PLUNGED STRAIGHT AT THE STONE WALL OF A DERELICT COTTAGE . . .

JUMP, ERNIE! FOR PETE'S SAKE-JUMP!


ERNIE HOYLE WOKE FROM A KIND OF STUPOR — TRIED TO ACT ON MATT'S SHOUT. HE WAS TOO LATE. EVEN AS HE LET GO OF THE BARREL OF THE TANK'S TWO-POUNDER, THE ARMOURED GIANT RAMMED HEADLONG INTO THE COTTAGE . . .

WITH THE VIOLENT CLANGOUR OF THE IMPACT RINGING IN THEIR EARS, THREE FIGURES HAD PEELED FROM THE BACK OF THE IRONCLAD . . . THE FIGURES OF MATT, KELLY, DALZIEL . . . BUT HOYLE HAD FAILED TO MAKE IT, THOUGH HE WAS NO LONGER ABOARD THE TANK WHEN IT JOLTED TO A STANDSTILL . . .
GREAT GRIEF! WHAT A PILE-UP!

THE THREE TROOPERS BEGAN TO CLAW AT THE RUBBLE URGENTLY. THEY WERE THINKING OF ERNIE HOYLE. HE WAS THE ONE MAN IN THE WHOLE SQUAD TO WHOM ALL OF THEM HAD TAKEN A LIKING . . .
YOU IDIOT! IT'S LUCKY THIS COTTAGE WAS DESERTED ANYWAY, OR —
HE'S DONE FOR! HE MUST HAVE BEEN KILLED OUTRIGHT!

BLUNDEN STOPPED SHORT AS HE HEARD MATT'S WORDS. HE DROPPED FROM THE FRONT OF THE CRUSADER, TOOK ONE LOOK AT HOYLE — THEN ROUNDED ON TONY CLARENCE . . .
YOU LITTLE SQUIRT, YOU'VE GOT SOMETHING TO ANSWER FOR —
NO, HE WASN'T! HE WARNED YOU HE HAD A PHOBIA ABOUT DRIVING, BUT YOU WOULDN'T LISTEN AND YOU MADE THINGS WORSE FOR HIM BY BARKING AT HIM ALL THE TIME! YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT HAPPENED TO HOYLE!

THE SERGEANT TWISTED TOWARDS THE ONE TIME GARAGE-HAND. HIS EYES BLAZED AND HIS FACE BURNED SCARLET AS HE THRUST IT CLOSE TO MATT'S. MATT GLARED BACK AT HIM . . .
WHAT'S THAT YOU SAID, LAWSON?
YOU HEARD WHAT I SAID! IF ANYONE KILLED HOYLE, IT WAS YOU! YOU'RE A BUTCHER, THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE!

MATT COULD HAVE SWORN HE DETECTED A MOMENTARY BLINK OF FEAR IN BLUNDEN'S SAVAGE SCRUTINY. IT WAS GONE IN AN INSTANT AND WAS SUCCEEDED BY A LOOK OF BLACK VENOM . . .
YOU'D BETTER WATCH YOUR TONGUE, LAWSON! IT'LL LAND YOU IN THE GLASSHOUSE ON A SERIOUS CHARGE IF YOU LET IT RUN AWAY WITH YOU! AND THE SAME GOES FOR ANYBODY ELSE WHO FEELS LIKE FLINGING OUT WILD ACCUSATIONS!

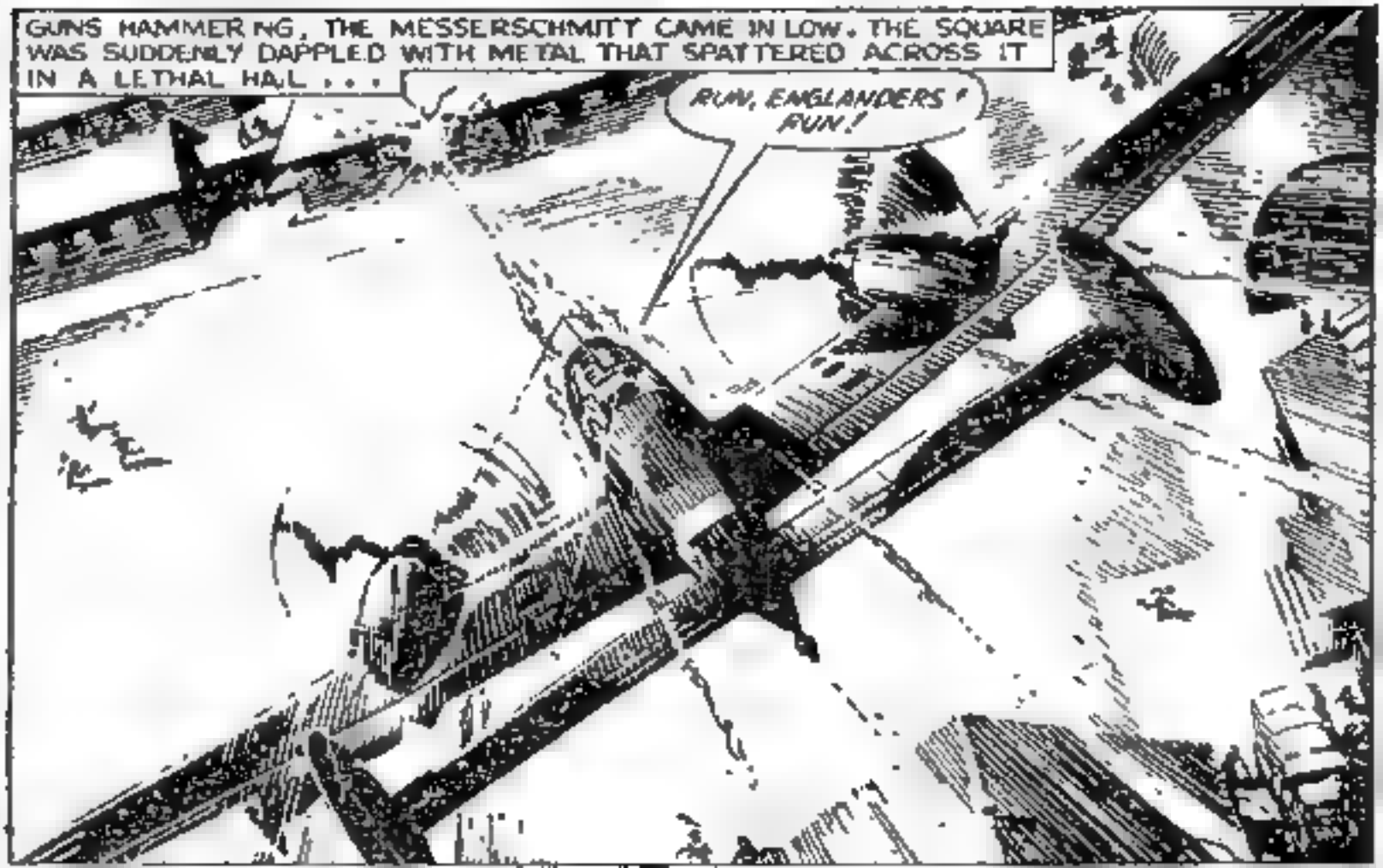
MAYBE MATT'S ACCUSATION HAD BEEN WILD. AT ANY RATE, A RESULTANT COURT OF NQUIRY APPORTIONED NO OFFICIAL BLAME — THOUGH FROM THE DAY OF THE TRAGEDY BLUNDEN PARLY HAD HIS KNIFE INTO THE EX MECHANIC . . .
THE COMMANDING OFFICER WANTS TO KNOW IF THERE ARE ANY LIKELY CANDIDATES FOR STRIPES AMONG THE LATEST INTAKE OF RECRUITS. HOW ABOUT YOUR SQUAD, SERGEANT BLUNDEN? THAT FELLOW LAWSON THERE, FOR INSTANCE? HE SEEMS TO BE SHAPING UP PRETTY WELL.
I WOULDN'T RECOMMEND HIM FOR PROMOTION, SIR. A BIT OF A REBEL — DOESN'T TAKE KINDLY TO DISCIPLINE —

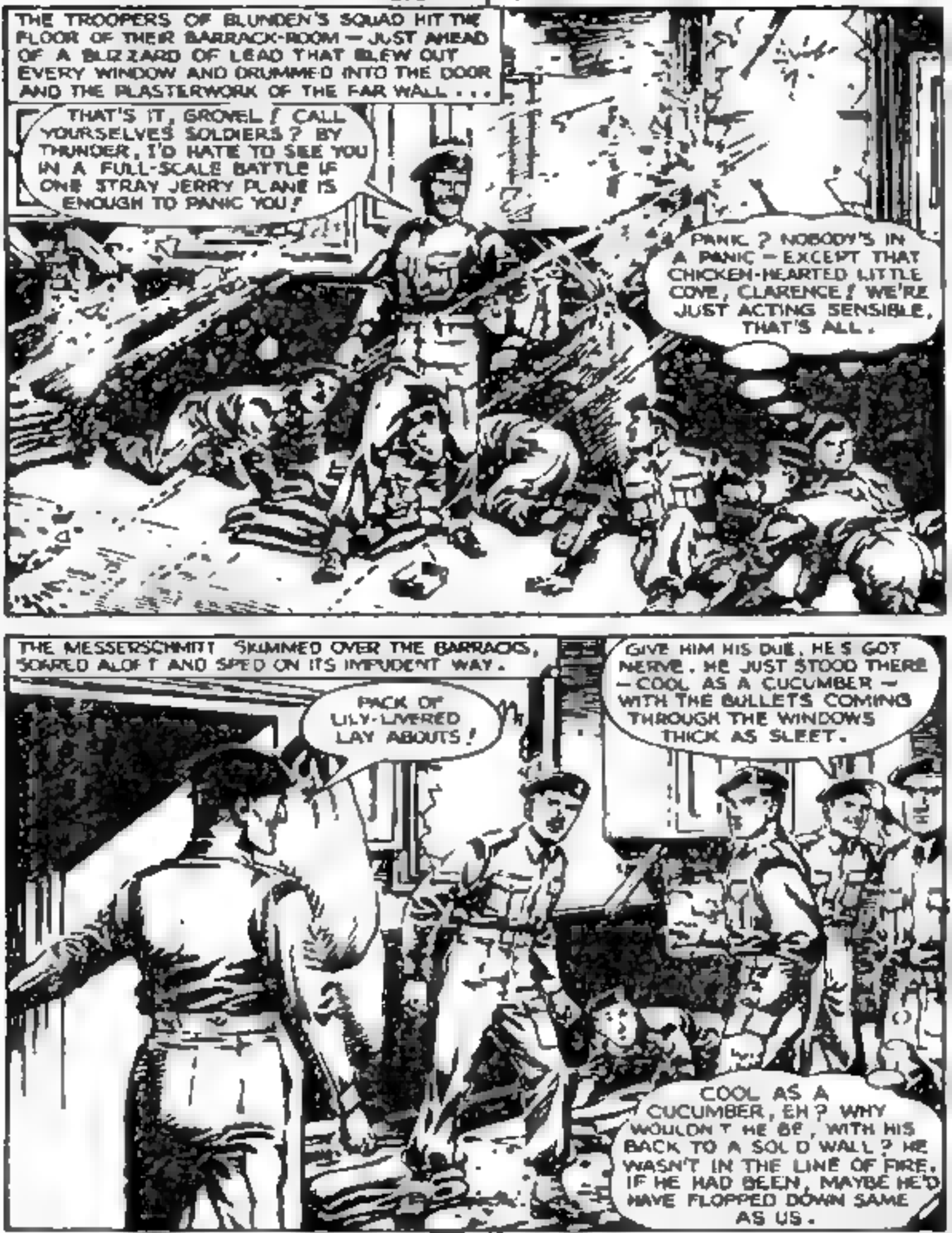
THE ROOKIES COMPLETED THE COURSE THAT MOULDED THEM INTO TROOPERS WITH VARYING QUALIFICATIONS — AS GUNNERS, DRIVERS, WIRELESS OPERATORS. THEN, EARLY ONE EVENING, BLUNDEN PARADED HIS SQUAD IN THEIR BARRACK-ROOM . . .
WELL, WE'VE COME TO THE PARTING OF THE WAYS AND I CAN'T SAY I'LL BE SORRY TO SEE THE BACK OF YOU.
HE'S BONKERS IF HE THINKS ANY OF US'LL BE SORRY TO SEE THE BACK OF HIM.
WHY'S THIS PRECIOUS SERGEANT OF OURS SMIRKING ALL OVER HIS FACE? SOMETHING MUST BE AMUSING THE SO-AND SO.

THE UNPLEASANT SMILE ON BLUNDEN'S THIN-LIPPED MOUTH STRETCHED INTO A BARE-TOOTHED GRIN . . .
YOU'RE BEING POSTED TO BOVINGTON CAMP, IN DORSET. YOUR NEXT MOVE WILL BE OVERSEAS. IT WON'T BE LONG BEFORE YOU'RE ON ACTIVE SERVICE, SO YOU CAN START SHIVERING IN YOUR BOOTS, SEE?
WHAT'S HE TAKE US FOR? I DARESAY WE'LL PUT UP A FAIR ENOUGH SHOW WHEN THE TIME COMES — ESPECIALLY WITHOUT HIM ON OUR NECKS!

STILL GRINNING SMUGLY, BLUNDEN GAVE HIS SQUAD THE ORDER TO FALL OUT. IT WAS JUST THEN THAT THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF BANSHEE WAILS AROSE . . .
ALL RIGHT ALL RIGHT — WHAT'S THE EXCITEMENT? HAVEN'T YOU EVER HEARD AIR-RAID SIRENS BEFORE?

ONCE IN A WHILE SOME GERMAN SNEAK-RAIDER FLEW OVER THE AREA — BOUND, USUALLY, FOR A NEARBY TOWN WHERE SEVERAL IMPORTANT FACTORIES WERE LOCATED. THE TARGET WAS NO FACTORY THIS TIME, THOUGH . . .
SHE'S GOING TO BOMB THE BARRACKS!
THAT'S NO BOMBER. SHE'S A FIGHTER — A TWIN-ENGINED MESSERSCHMITT ONE-ONE-O. LOOK, SHE'S LETTING RIP WITH HER GUNS . . .
HARK AT KELLY — THE EXPERT — THE BLOOMING KNOW-ALL . . .


GUNS HAMMERING, THE MESSERSCHMITT CAME IN LOW. THE SQUARE WAS SUDDENLY DAPPLED WITH METAL THAT SPATTERED ACROSS IT IN A LETHAL HAIL . . .
RUN, ENGLANDERS! RUN!


THE TROOPERS OF BLUNDEN'S SQUAD HIT THE FLOOR OF THEIR BARRACK-ROOM — JUST AHEAD OF A BLIZZARD OF LEAD THAT BLEW OUT EVERY WINDOW AND DRUMMED INTO THE DOOR AND THE PLASTERWORK OF THE FAR WALL . . .
THAT'S IT, GROVEL! CALL YOURSELVES SOLDIERS? BY THUNDER, I'D HATE TO SEE YOU IN A FULL-SCALE BATTLE IF ONE STRAY JERRY PLANE IS ENOUGH TO PANIC YOU!
PANIC? NOBODY'S IN A PANIC — EXCEPT THAT CHICKEN-HEARTED LITTLE COVE, CLARENCE! WE'RE JUST ACTING SENSIBLE, THAT'S ALL.
THE MESSERSCHMITT SKIMMED OVER THE BARRACKS, SOARED ALOFT AND SPED ON ITS IMPUDENT WAY.
PACK OF LILY-LIVERED LAY ABOUTS!
GIVE HIM HIS DUE, HE'S GOT NERVE. HE JUST STOOD THERE — COOL AS A CUCUMBER — WITH THE BULLETS COMING THROUGH THE WINDOWS THICK AS SLEET.
COOL AS A CUCUMBER, EH? WHY WOULDN'T HE BE, WITH HIS BACK TO A SOLID WALL? HE WASN'T IN THE LINE OF FIRE. IF HE HAD BEEN, MAYBE HE'D HAVE FLOPPED DOWN SAME AS US.

Chapter 2. FORWARD and ENGAGE

THE SERGEANT WAS WRONG. HIS NAME WAS ON THE LIST BY INTENTION, NOT ERROR. AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DEPOT'S COMMANDING OFFICER IN THE PRESENCE OF THE ADJUTANT LEFT HIM IN NO DOUBT ON THAT SCORE . . .
BUT, SIR, I'VE ONLY BEEN HERE SIX MONTHS ALL TOLD. I THOUGHT I WAS ON THE PERMANENT STAFF—
IN THE ARMY THE WORD PERMANENT SHOULDN'T BE TAKEN TOO LITERALLY, SERGEANT. YOU'VE BEEN A SOLDIER LONG ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT.

A CURT DISMISSAL FROM THE COLONEL AND BLUNDEN SALUTED PERFUNCTORILY AND MARCHED OUT WITH HIS MOUTH PINCHED INTO A BITTER LINE. WHEN HE HAD GONE, THE COMMANDING OFFICER GLANCED AT THE ADJUTANT . . .
I'VE HAD MY DOUBTS ABOUT BLUNDEN'S SUITABILITY AS AN INSTRUCTOR FOR SOME TIME PAST. AND YOU KNOW WHAT I FELT ABOUT THE DEATH OF THAT POOR CHAP HOYLE.
YES, SIR, THAT WAS A BAD BUSINESS. LIKE YOU, I CONSIDER BLUNDEN WAS LUCKY TO BE EXONERATED. ANYHOW, I'M SURE YOU'VE DONE THE RIGHT THING IN HAVING HIM POSTED.

SO BLUNDEN WENT TO BOVINGTON WITH THE MEN HE HAD HELPED TO TRAIN. AND FROM BOVINGTON HE SET OUT WITH THEM SOME WEEKS LATER IN A PARTY DESTINED FOR A HUSH-HUSH LOCATION OVERSEAS — A PARTY WHICH MILITARY CORRESPONDENCE REFERRED TO AS 'C' DRAFT . . .
SO LONG, GIRLS! WE'LL WRITE YOU FROM NORTH AFRICA!
SHUT YOUR TRAP, DALZIEL! YOU WANT TO REMEMBER WHAT WE WERE TOLD ABOUT SECURITY, YOU BIG BLABBER-MOUTH! WE WERE ALL WARNED NOT TO SAY WHERE WE WERE GOING!

RAZZLE-DAZZLE DALZIEL FLARED UP...
WHO D'YOU THINK YOU'RE TALKING TO, KELLY? DON'T YOU START TRYING TO BOSS ME AROUND. THIS AIN'T CIVVY STREET AND I AIN'T ONE OF YOUR WORKERS! BY GUM, I'LL KNOCK YOUR BLOCK OFF —
CUT IT OUT, DALZIEL! KELLY'S RIGHT ABOUT SECURITY — THOUGH I'LL ADMIT HE DIDN'T HAVE TO USE THAT TONE!

THE FOLLOWING DAY, THEY SAILED ABOARD A TROOPSHIP ALONG WITH PERSONNEL FROM MANY OTHER UNITS . . .
CHEER UP, HALF-PINT. YOU LOOK AS IF YOU WERE GOING TO A FLIPPING FUNERAL.
M-MAYBE I AM . . . BUT I WISH YOU WOULDN'T CALL ME HALF-PINT. IT REMINDS ME TOO MUCH OF BLUNDEN. THAT'S HIS NICKNAME FOR ME.
BLUNDEN . . . HE DON'T LOOK SO CHIRPY EITHER. MAYBE HE'S MISSING HIS PALS. HE SEEMS LONESOME.
A BLOKE LIKE HIM COULDN'T HAVE ANY PALS. EVEN THE OTHER SERGEANTS STEER CLEAR OF HIM.

THE VOYAGE WAS UNEVENTFUL. TONY CLARENCE HOPED THEIR STAY IN NORTH AFRICA WOULD BE, TOO. WHY NOT? THIS WAS THE SPRING OF 1943, AND THE FIGHTING THERE WAS NEAR ITS END WHEN 'C' DRAFT WAS SPLIT UP AMONG A REGIMENT OF THE FAMED DESERT RATS . . .
I'M LIEUTENANT JENNINGS, SERGEANT. I HEAR YOU AND THESE CHAPS HAVE BEEN ALLOTTED TO MY TROOP. I PROPOSE TO KEEP YOU TOGETHER. YOU'LL FORM THE CREW OF NUMBER THREE TANK. AS YOU CAN SEE, WE'RE EQUIPPED WITH SHERMANS.
YES, MISTER JENNINGS.
BLIMEY, THIS MEANS WE'RE STUCK WITH BLUNDEN AGAIN. AIN'T WE EVER GOING TO GET A BREAK?

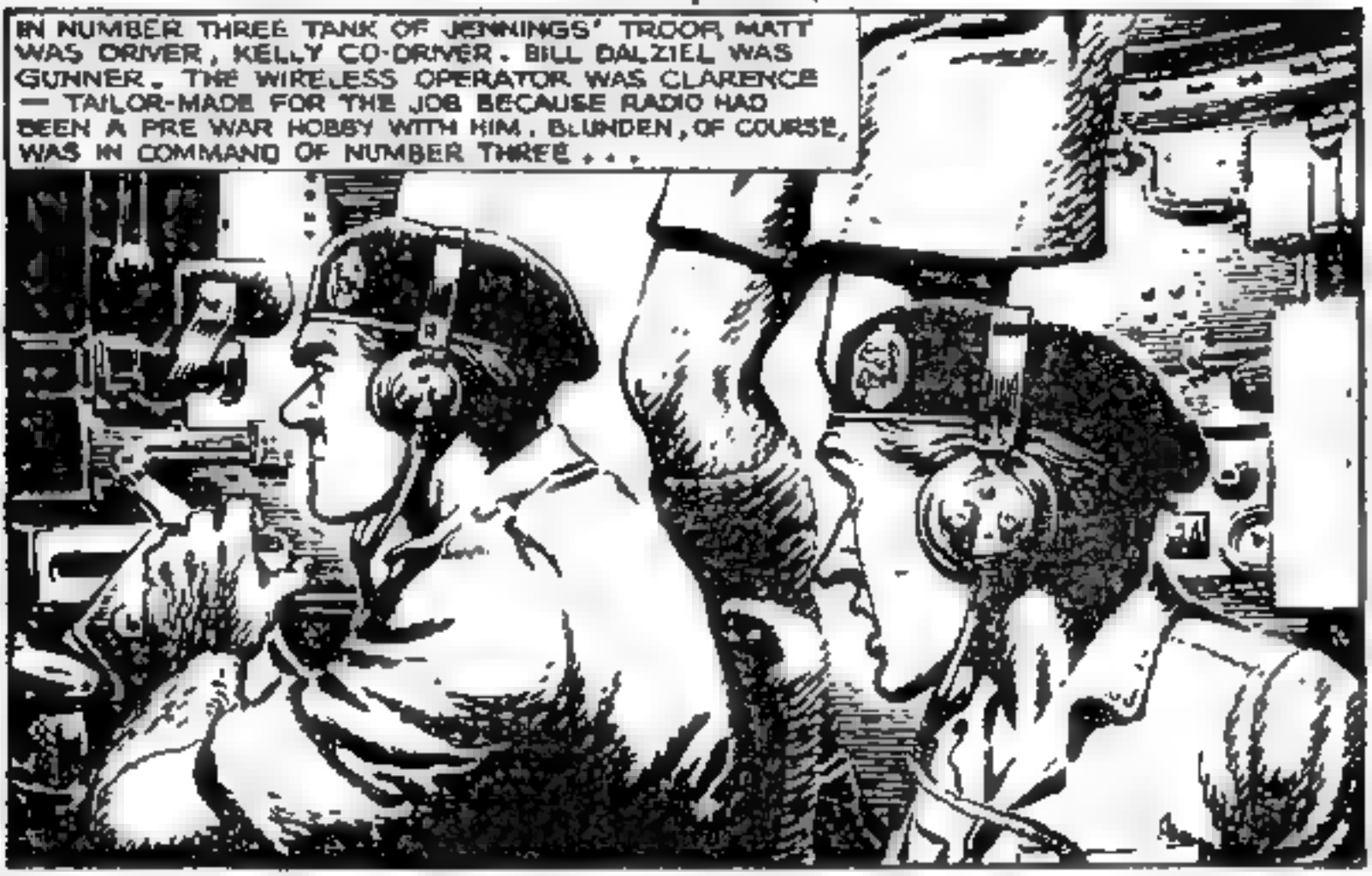
THE GERMAN AFRIKA KORPS AND ITS RELUCTANT ITALIAN ALLIES HAD BEEN BOTTLED UP IN TUNISIA. THE NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN SEEMED ALL OVER BAR THE SHOUTING. BUT ONE MORE ACTION LAY AHEAD OF THE REGIMENT...
WE MOVE AT FIRST LIGHT TO BLOCK A ROAD NEAR AGAREB. IT'S THOUGHT THAT ELEMENTS OF THE ENEMY'S FIFTEENTH PANZER DIVISION MAY TRY TO ESCAPE BY IT.

THAT NIGHT, TONY CLARENCE REPORTED TO THE REGIMENT'S MEDICAL OFFICER — CAPTAIN NORRIS, TALL, SCHOLARLY-LOOKING...
I KEEP GETTING STOMACH-CRAMPS, SIR. I — I THINK IT MUST BE FOOD-POISONING. I WAS IN HOSPITAL WITH IT ONCE, BEFORE THE WAR...
H'M — FOOD-POISONING, EH?

THE MEDICAL OFFICER GAVE THE LITTLE TROOPER A CURSORY EXAMINATION AND THEN DELIVERED A QUOTATION INSTEAD OF A DIAGNOSIS...
NO, YOU'RE NOT SUFFERING FROM FOOD-POISONING, BUT — 'THE NATIVE HUE OF RESOLUTION IS SICKLIED O'ER WITH THE PALE CAST OF THOUGHT...'
THAT'S FROM SHAKESPEARE'S 'HAMLET. THE DOC KNOWS WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME — JUST AS WELL AS I KNOW IT MYSELF.

THE MEDICAL OFFICER WAS EYING TONY INTENTLY, BUT NOT IN AN UNKINDLY FASHION. WHEN THE TROOPER SPOKE, IT WAS WITH A CATCH IN HIS VOICE . . .
YOU'RE RIGHT SIR. WANT OF RESOLUTION — THAT'S MY TROUBLE. I'M — AFRAID . . . AFRAID OF TOMORROW . . . SCARED I WON'T BE ABLE TO FACE UP TO IT, SIR . . .
I UNDERSTAND. BUT TO BE AFRAID OF FEAR IS HALFWAY TO CONQUERING IT. LOOK, I'LL GIVE YOU A SEDATIVE. IT'LL HELP TO CALM YOUR NERVES. THAT'S ABOUT ALL I CAN DO. THE REST IS UP TO YOURSELF. DON'T WORRY — I'M SURE YOU'LL MAKE OUT ALL RIGHT.

TONY WISHED HE COULD BE AS SURE OF THAT AS THE SYMPATHETIC CAPTAIN NORRIS. WHEN FIRST LIGHT CAME AND THE REGIMENT PREPARED TO MOVE AFTER A NIGHT SPENT IN OVERHAULING VEHICLES AND EQUIPMENT AND STOCKING UP WITH SUPPLIES, HE WAS SHAKING LIKE A LEAF. . .
HURRY IT UP, CAN'T YOU?


IN NUMBER THREE TANK OF JENNINGS' TROOP, MATT WAS DRIVER, KELLY CO-DRIVER. BILL DALZIEL WAS GUNNER. THE WIRELESS OPERATOR WAS CLARENCE — TAILOR-MADE FOR THE JOB BECAUSE RADIO HAD BEEN A PRE WAR HOBBY WITH HIM. BLUNDEN, OF COURSE, WAS IN COMMAND OF NUMBER THREE . . .

EDGY AT FIRST, BLUNDEN GREW STRANGELY SUBDUED AS THE REGIMENT ROLLED FROM THE AREA WHERE IT HAD LEAGUERED OVERNIGHT. THE SOUND OF THE THIRTY-CYLINDER CHRYSLER MOTORS OF THE SHERMANS SWELLED INTO A COLLECTIVE ROAR . . .
A CRUSADER WEIGHED NINETEEN-ODD TONS. THIS WEIGHS THIRTY-ONE AND MORE, AND ITS ARMOUR'S A LOT THICKER. BUT . . .

AFTER FIFTEEN MINUTES WIRELESS SILENCE WAS BROKEN BY THE COLONEL OF THE REGIMENT . . .

HELLO, NOMO. NOMO CALLING. ENEMY TANKS NUMBERING FIGURES FOUR ZERO HAVE JUST BEEN REPORTED ABOUT FIGURES TWELVE MILES NORTH-EAST OF AGAREB. CHANGE DIRECTION FIGURES FIVE DEGREES RIGHT. WE WILL ENGAGE. REPORT AS SOON AS YOU SEE THEM. OVER.

AHEAD LAY A BROAD RANGE OF LOW HILLS SCARRED BY GULLIES. THE SHERMANS LURCHED THROUGH THIS BROKEN COUNTRY ON A WIDE FRONT. JENNINGS' TROOP WAS WELL TO THE FORE AND MATT TOOK NUMBER THREE TANK ALONG A NARROW WADI — CAME OUT OF IT AT LAST ON TO OPEN GROUND . . .

WATCH IT, LAWSON ANY MINUTE AND WE'RE LIABLE TO SPOT THOSE JERRIES.

BLUNDEN'S CAUTIONARY WORDS HAD SCARCELY SOUNDED OVER THE INTERCOM WHEN MATT SAW A NUMBER OF SQUAT, SINISTER SHAPES EIGHT HUNDRED YARDS AWAY — MOVING ACROSS THE PLAIN WITH DUST BOILING UP BEHIND THEM . . .

THERE THEY ARE NOW!

THE ENEMY TANKS WERE PANZERKAMPWAGENS MARK IV, FORTY STRONG. TWO HAD THEIR GUNS GOING IN DOUBLE QUICK TIME. FLAME AND SMOKE BELCHED FROM THE MUZZLES AND A COUPLE OF TRACER SHELLS BURNED THEIR WAY PAST THE SHERMAN'S CUPOLA...

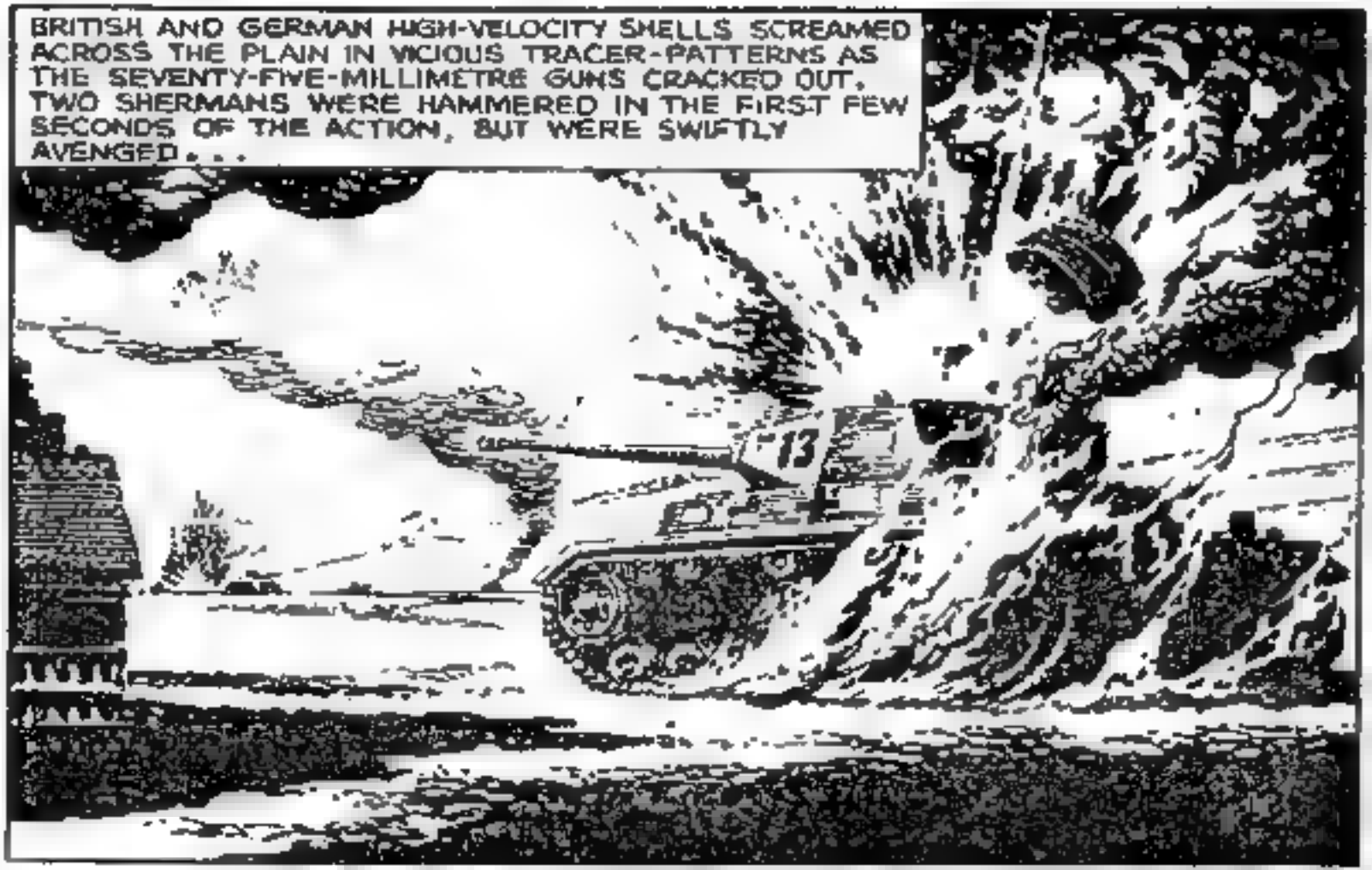
DALZIEL READIED HIMSELF FOR A FRE-ORDER FROM BLUNDEN. NONE CAME. INSTEAD, THE SERGEANT GASPED AT MATT OVER THE SHERMAN'S INTERCOM...
SWING HARD ROUND, LAWSON! TURN INTO THE WADI AGAIN! QUICK MAN!

THERE WAS A QUALITY IN BLUNDEN'S VOICE THAT BORE OUT A VAGUE SUSPICION MATT HAD FORMED MANY WEEKS AGO.
AND THAT'S THE BIG MOUTHED BLUSTERER WHO ONCE CALLED A WHOLE SQUAD OF US A PACK OF LILY-LIVERED LAY-ABOUTS! HE'S SCARED, DEAD SCARED!

MATT JAMMED THE GEAR LEVER INTO REVERSE, STARTED TO BACK THE SHERMAN. PROMPTLY BLUNDEN HOWLED AT HIM — AND WAS ANSWERED CRISPLY BUT COOLLY . . .
WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU PLAYING AT, LAWSON? SWING HARD ROUND, I SAID! GET US UNDER COVER — AND FAST!
THAT'S WHAT I'M DOING, SERGEANT — BUT NOT BY SWINGING ROUND. OUR THICKEST ARMOUR'S IN THE FRONT. IF WE COP A PACKET IT'S BETTER WE SHOULD BE HIT THERE THAN IN THE TAIL.

BLUNDEN WAS INSTANTLY SILENT. IN THE FLURRY OF THE MOMENT HE HAD FORGOTTEN THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF A TACTICAL WITHDRAWAL . . .

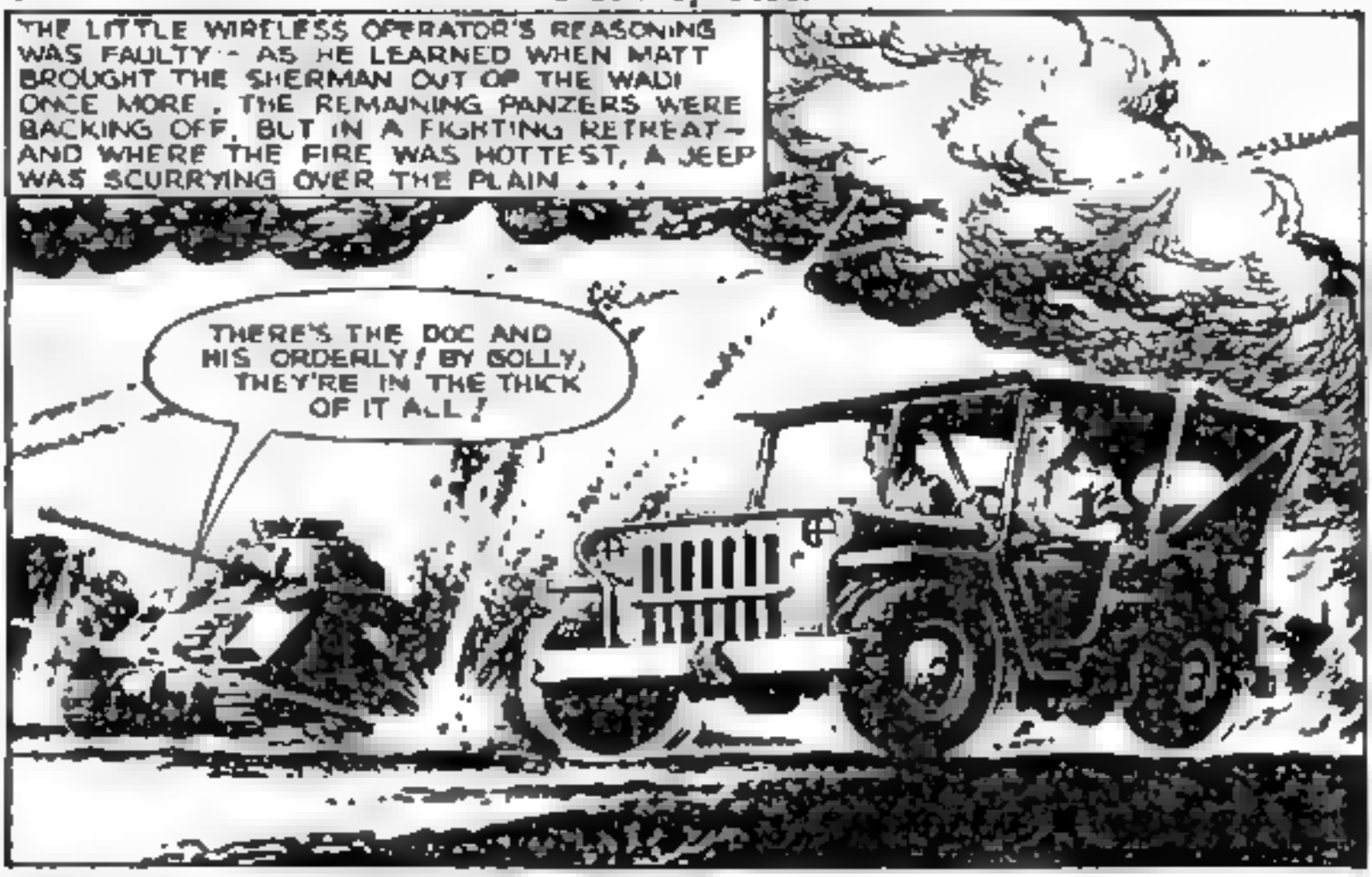
ONCE HE WAS SAFE BLUNDEN REGAINED HIS COMPOSURE. HE REPORTED TO JENNINGS OVER THE RADIO, POMPOUSLY — AND NEEDLESSLY. ALREADY JENNINGS' TANK AND OTHER SHERMANS OF THE REGIMENT WERE SURGING OUT ON TO THE OPEN GROUND — AND INTO THE ATTACK!
TRAVERSE RIGHT — ON — ENEMY MARK FOUR — RANGE SEVEN HUNDRED — FIRE!

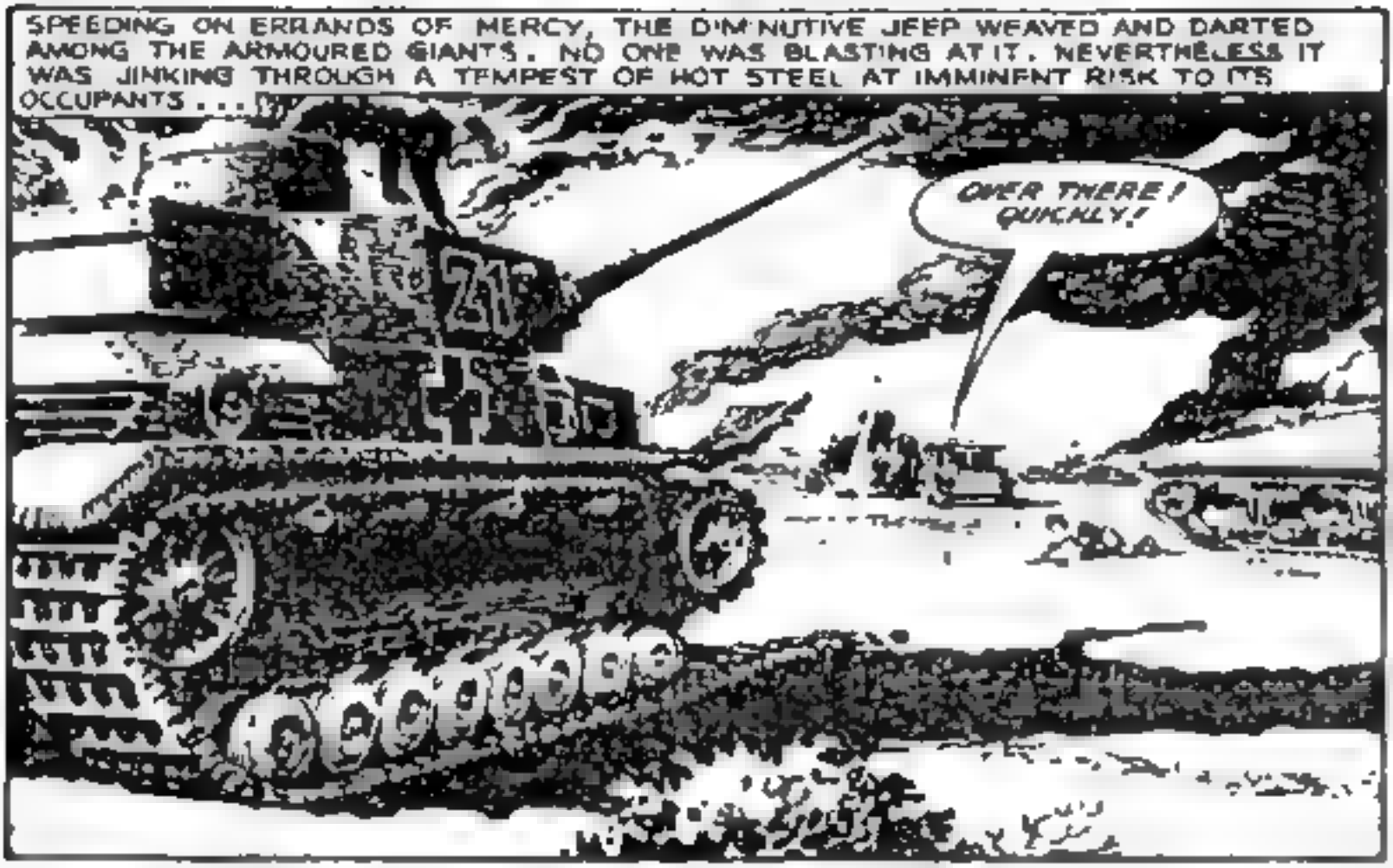

BRITISH AND GERMAN HIGH-VELOCITY SHELLS SCREAMED ACROSS THE PLAIN IN VICIOUS TRACER-PATTERNS AS THE SEVENTY-FIVE-MILLIMETRE GUNS CRACKED OUT. TWO SHERMANS WERE HAMMERED IN THE FIRST FEW SECONDS OF THE ACTION, BUT WERE SWIFTLY AVENGED...
13

TENTATIVELY, BLUNDEN RAISED HIS HEAD TO WATCH THAT FEROCIOUS DUEL OF IRONCLADS . . .
OUR BLOKES ARE FAIRLY CLOUTING THE HUNS NOW!

DALZIEL WAS LOOKING UP AT HIM IN BEWILDERMENT, VERY CONSCIOUS OF THE APPREHENSION THE SERGEANT HAD DISPLAYED A MINUTE OR TWO PREVIOUSLY.
SHOULDN'T WE BE OUT THERE DOING OUR STUFF, SERGEANT?
IT WOULD SUIT ME TO STAY RIGHT WHERE WE ARE.

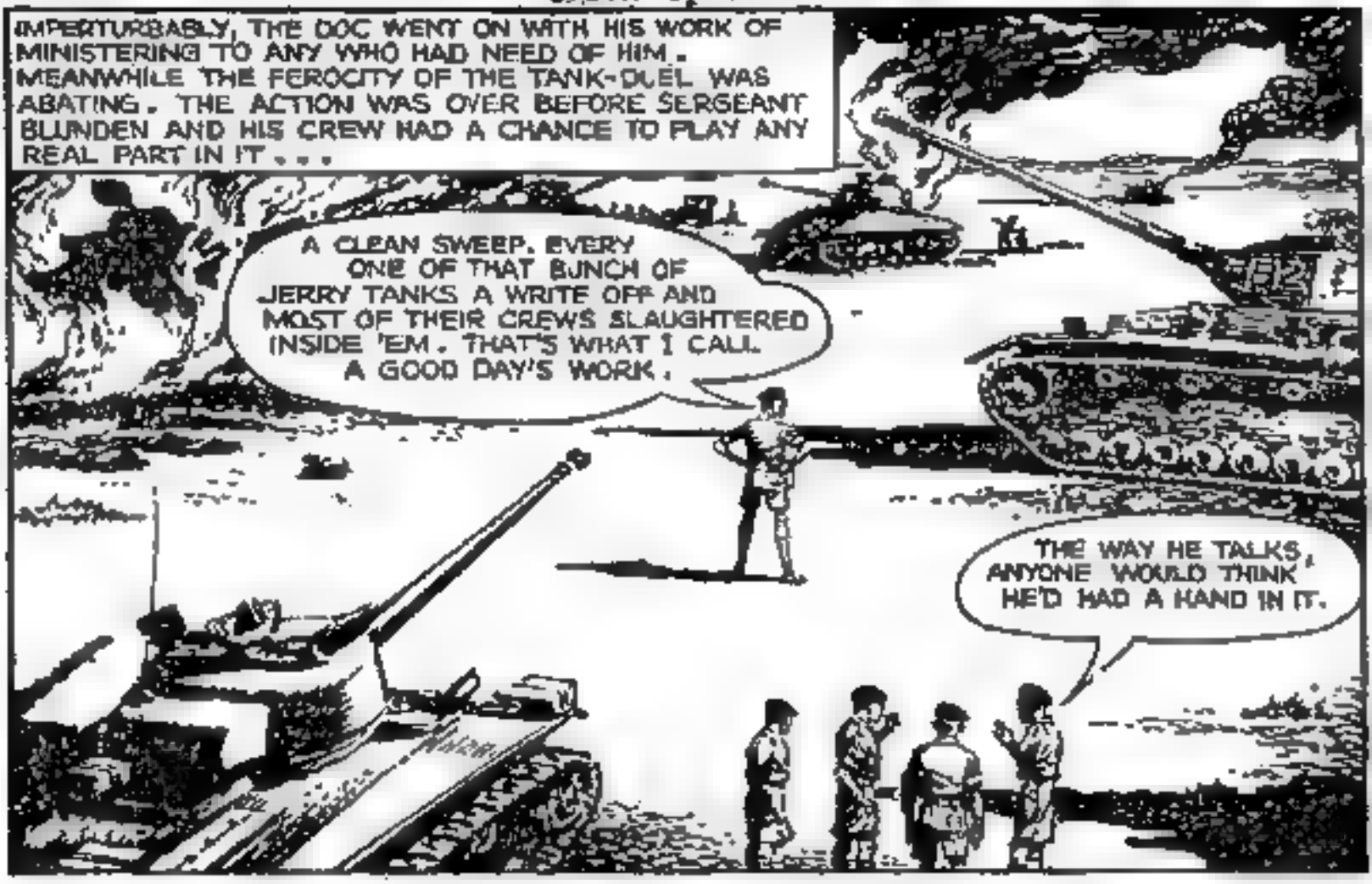
TONY CLARENCE HAD BEEN TOO PREOCCUPIED BY HIS OWN ANXIETIES TO NOTICE BLUNDEN'S TEMPORARY LAPSE. HE SHUDDERED WHEN BLUNDEN GAVE MATT THE COMMAND TO DRIVE FORWARD AGAIN. THE SERGEANT'S VOICE HAD COMPLETELY RECOVERED ITS CUSTOMARY PARADE-GROUND SNAP . . .
SHOVE AHEAD, LAWSON!
I SUPPOSE A HIGHER EDUCATION'S MADE ME MORE SENSITIVE THAN THE OTHERS IN THIS TANK. THEY'RE ALL THICK SKINNED UNIMAGINATIVE . . . YES, EVEN KELLY. HE HAD HIS OWN BUSINESS, BUT HE'S A ROUGH DIAMOND LIKE THE REST . . .


THE LITTLE WIRELESS OPERATOR'S REASONING WAS FAULTY - AS HE LEARNED WHEN MATT BROUGHT THE SHERMAN OUT OF THE WADI ONCE MORE. THE REMAINING PANZERS WERE BACKING OFF, BUT IN A FIGHTING RETREAT - AND WHERE THE FIRE WAS HOTTEST, A JEEP WAS SCURRYING OVER THE PLAIN . . .
THERE'S THE DOC AND HIS ORDERLY! BY GOLLY, THEY'RE IN THE THICK OF IT ALL!


SPEEDING ON ERRANDS OF MERCY, THE DIMINUTIVE JEEP WEAVED AND DARTED AMONG THE ARMOURED GIANTS. NO ONE WAS BLASTING AT IT. NEVERTHELESS IT WAS JINKING THROUGH A TEMPEST OF HOT STEEL AT IMMINENT RISK TO ITS OCCUPANTS . . .
OVER THERE! QUICKLY!

THE DOC ALIGHTED AS THE JEEP DRY-SKIDDED TO A HALT NEAR TWO WOUNDED SURVIVORS FROM A BRACE OF BREWED-UP TANKS — A GERMAN AND A BRITON. THE WICKED STUTTER OF A NAZI MACHINE-GUN WAS CHOKED OFF ABRUPTLY AS HE MOVED WITH CALM TREAD THROUGH THE TRACK OF ITS TORRENT OF SLUGS . . .
ACHTUNG! CEASE FIRE!
HELP ME, ENGLANDER! HELP ME!
ALL RIGHT, FRITZ. YOU'RE IN THE WORST FIX. I'LL ATTEND TO YOU FIRST.

AN ARMY BLANKET SMOTHERED THE FLAMES THAT WERE LICKING AROUND THE INJURED GERMAN. NORRIS TURNED THEN TO THE AID OF THE BRITISH CASUALTY . . .


IMPERTURBABLY, THE DOC WENT ON WITH HIS WORK OF MINISTERING TO ANY WHO HAD NEED OF HIM. MEANWHILE THE FEROCITY OF THE TANK-DUEL WAS ABATING. THE ACTION WAS OVER BEFORE SERGEANT BLUNDEN AND HIS CREW HAD A CHANCE TO PLAY ANY REAL PART IN IT . . .
A CLEAN SWEEP. EVERY ONE OF THAT BUNCH OF JERRY TANKS A WRITE OFF AND MOST OF THEIR CREWS SLAUGHTERED INSIDE 'EM. THAT'S WHAT I CALL A GOOD DAY'S WORK.
THE WAY HE TALKS, ANYONE WOULD THINK HE'D HAD A HAND IN IT.

TONY CLARENCE FLINCHED AS HE LOOKED ON THE DEBRIS OF THE DESPERATE COMBAT THAT HAD BEEN WAGED. HE VISUALISED, ALL TOO VIVIDLY, THE WAY SO MANY HAD DIED IN THOSE SHATTERED HULLS AND TURRETS . . .
HOW CAN I EVER MEASURE UP TO ALL THE VIOLENCE AND TERROR OF A BATTLEFIELD . . ?

AVERTING HIS EYES FROM THE NEAREST OF THE WRECKS, HE CAUGHT SIGHT OF A TALL SCHOLARLY FIGURE . . .
THERE'S A MAN WITH MORE LEARN[redacted] THAN I'LL EVER HAVE — AND AS MUCH IMAGINATION, I'LL SWEAR. YET NO ONE COULD BE BRAVER. WHAT WAS IT HE SAID? TO BE AFRAID OF FEAR IS HALFWAY TO CONQUERING IT . . .

LITTLE TROOPER CLARENCE WAS NOT PUT TO THE TEST AGAIN IN NORTH AFRICA. WITHIN A FEW HOURS, THE REGIMENT IN WHICH 'C' DRAFT HAD BEEN MUSTERED WAS WATCHING THE WHOLESALE SURRENDER OF THE GERMAN PANZERARMEE . . .
BUT HE AND HIS COMRADES WERE SOON TO BE IN ACTION ELSEWHERE. FOR ALREADY, WITH NORTH AFRICA WON, BRITISH AND ALLIED COMMANDERS WERE PLANNING THE DETAILS OF THE NEXT PHASE IN THE WAR — AN ASSAULT ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN.

Chapter 3. INVASION BEACH

Clash of Steel

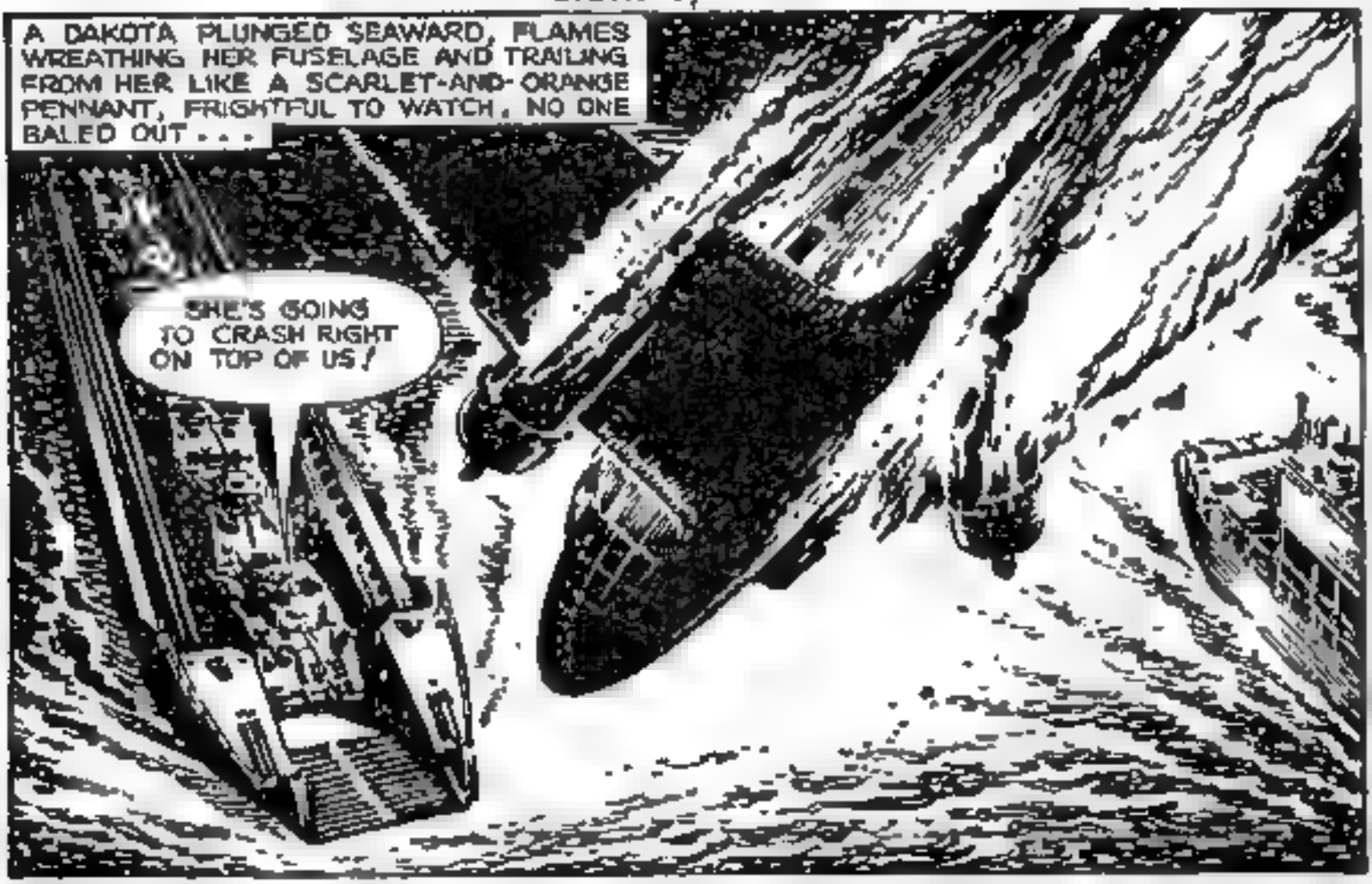
THE ARMADA SET OUT IN BROAD DAYLIGHT. HOURS LATER UNDER CLOAK OF NIGHT, UNITS OF THE MASSIVE FLEET WERE OFF CAPE PASSERO IN SICILY. THE ASSAULT ON THAT TEN THOUSAND SQUARE-MILES OF ISLAND NEAR THE TOE OF ITALY WAS GOING IN . . .

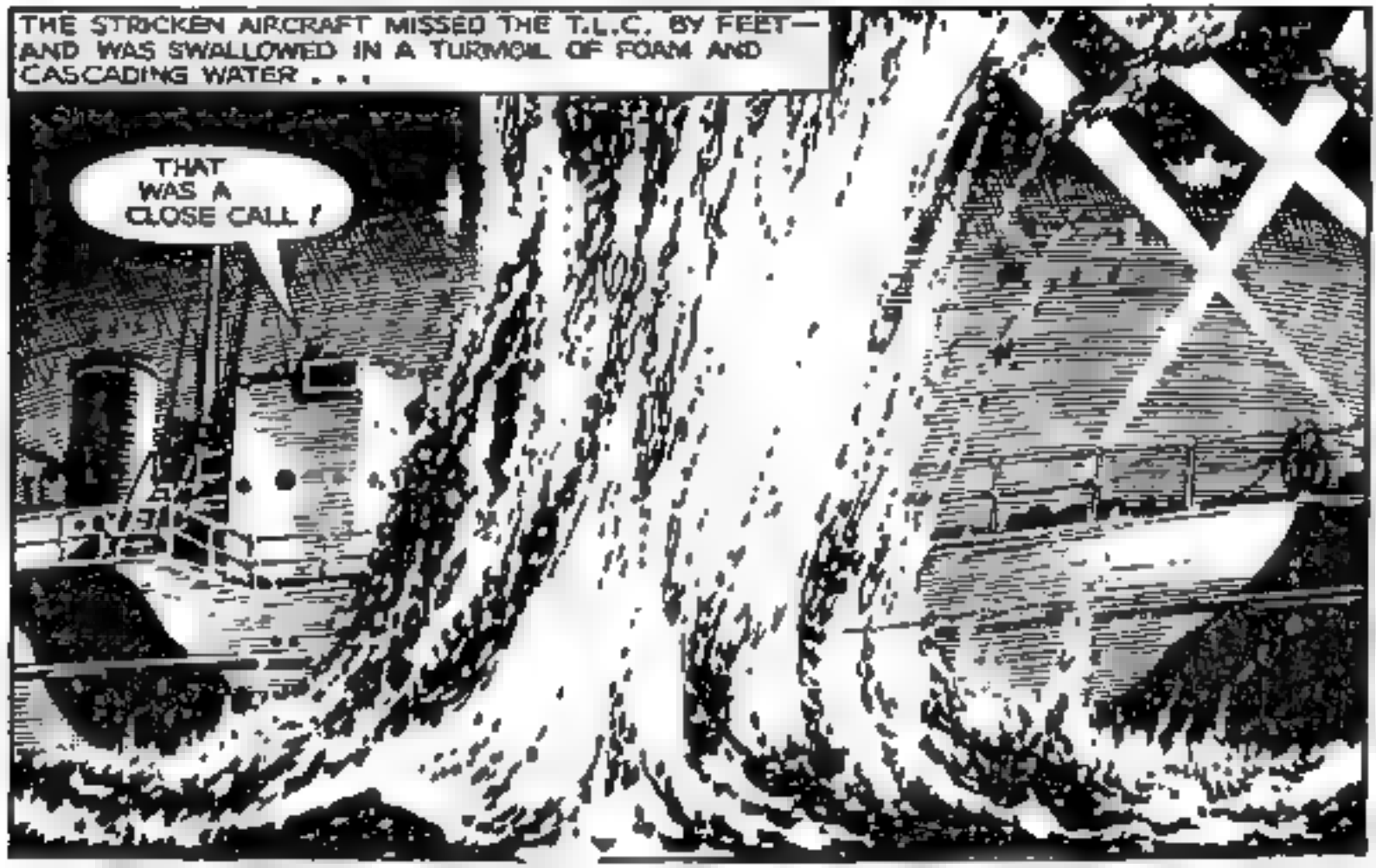
IT WAS THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING. THE ENEMY HAD NOT BEEN CAUGHT NAPPING, THOUGH. SEARCHLIGHTS GROPED FROM THE CAPE. ONE FLASHED ACROSS A T.L.C. THAT WAS BEARING TWO SHERMANS TOWARDS THE BEACH . . .

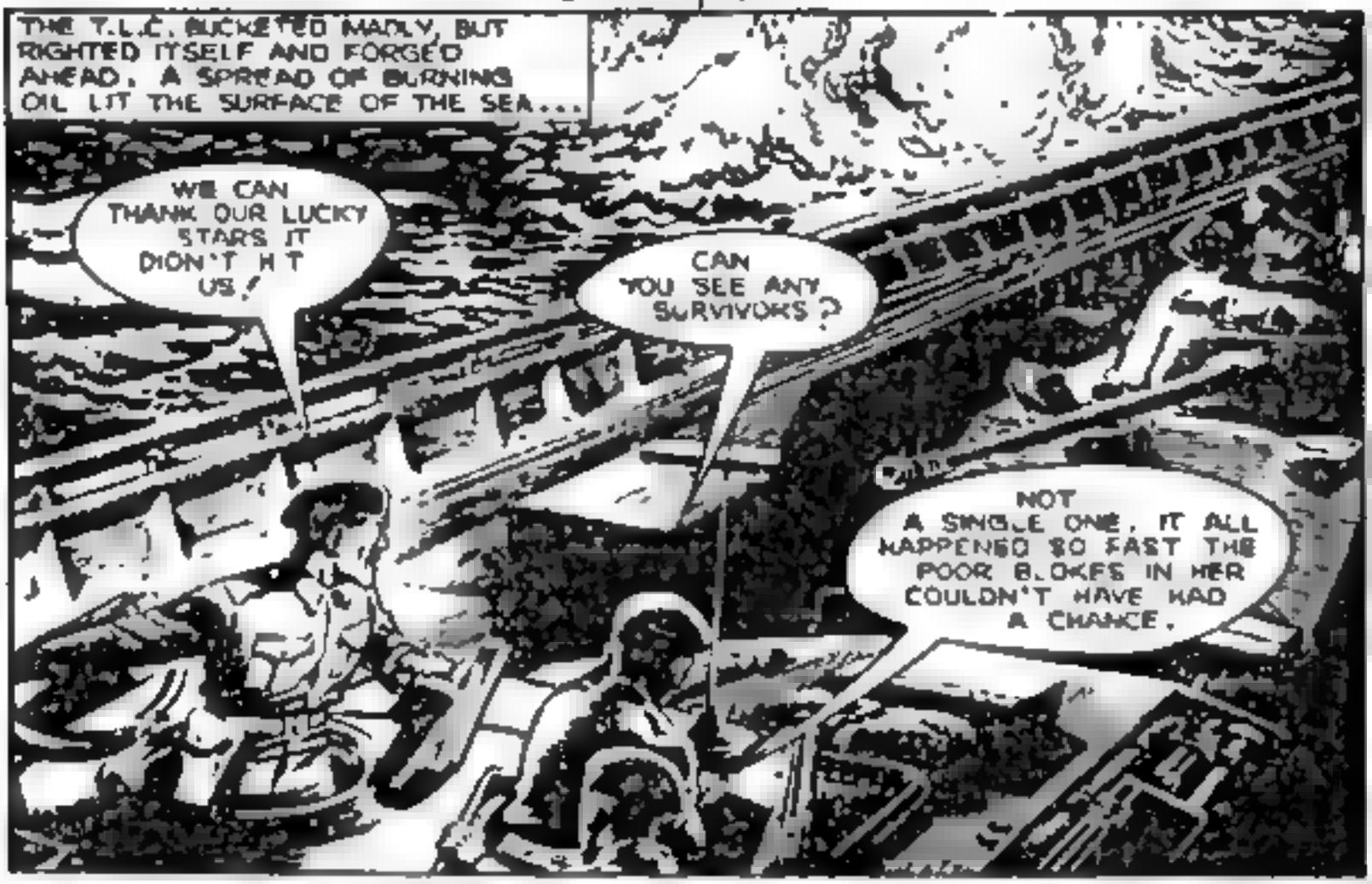
THAT'S TORN IT! WE'RE SITTING DUCKS FOR ANY SHORE GUNS NOW!

BUT THE SEARCHLIGHT DID NOT LINGER. IT LIFTED SHARPLY SKYWARD WITH OTHER QUESTING BEAMS, FOR THE DRIVE AGAINST SICILY WAS NOT ONLY SEABORNE. THE AIR CARRIED A POWERFUL THREAT TO THE ISLAND'S DEFENCES AS WELL . . .
STAND UP AND HOOK UP!

[redacted] THUNDERED A CHALLENGE TO THE INCOMING AIR ARMADA. ANGRY [redacted] FLAME STABBED AND SLASHED AT THE SKY...


A DAKOTA PLUNGED SEAWARD, FLAMES WREATHING HER FUSELAGE AND TRAILING FROM HER LIKE A SCARLET-AND-ORANGE PENNANT, FRIGHTFUL TO WATCH. NO ONE BALED OUT . . .
SHE'S GOING TO CRASH RIGHT ON TOP OF US!


THE STRICKEN AIRCRAFT MISSED THE T.L.C. BY FEET— AND WAS SWALLOWED IN A TURMOIL OF FOAM AND CASCADING WATER . . .
THAT WAS A CLOSE CALL!


THE T.L.C. BUCKETED MADLY, BUT RIGHTED ITSELF AND FORGED AHEAD. A SPREAD OF BURNING OIL LIT THE SURFACE OF THE SEA...
WE CAN THANK OUR LUCKY STARS IT DIDN'T HIT US!
CAN YOU SEE ANY SURVIVORS?
NOT A SINGLE ONE. IT ALL HAPPENED SO FAST THE POOR BLOKES IN HER COULDN'T HAVE HAD A CHANCE.

DUNDEE'S TONE WAS ONE OF FERVENT RELIEF BUT HIS FACE CLOUDED OVER AS THEY DREW CLOSER TO THE SHORE. HE COULD HEAR THE CRACK OF RIFLES NOW, THE CLATTER OF MACHINE-GUNS, THE CONCUSSIONS OF HEAVIER WEAPONS. A NAVAL LIEUTENANT IN CHARGE OF THE T.L.C. CALLED TO HIM...
WE'RE NEARLY HOME AND DRY, SERGEANT. ARE YOU ALL SET?
YES.. YES, ALL SET...

TAUT-FACED, BLUNDEN LISTENED TO THE FIRING — LISTENED, TOO, TO THE ENGINE-THROB OF THE SHERMAN HE COMMANDED. SOON THE STEEL MONSTER WOULD BE PULSING INTO VIOLENT LIFE AS IT BORE HIM INTO THE HAZARDS OF BATTLE...

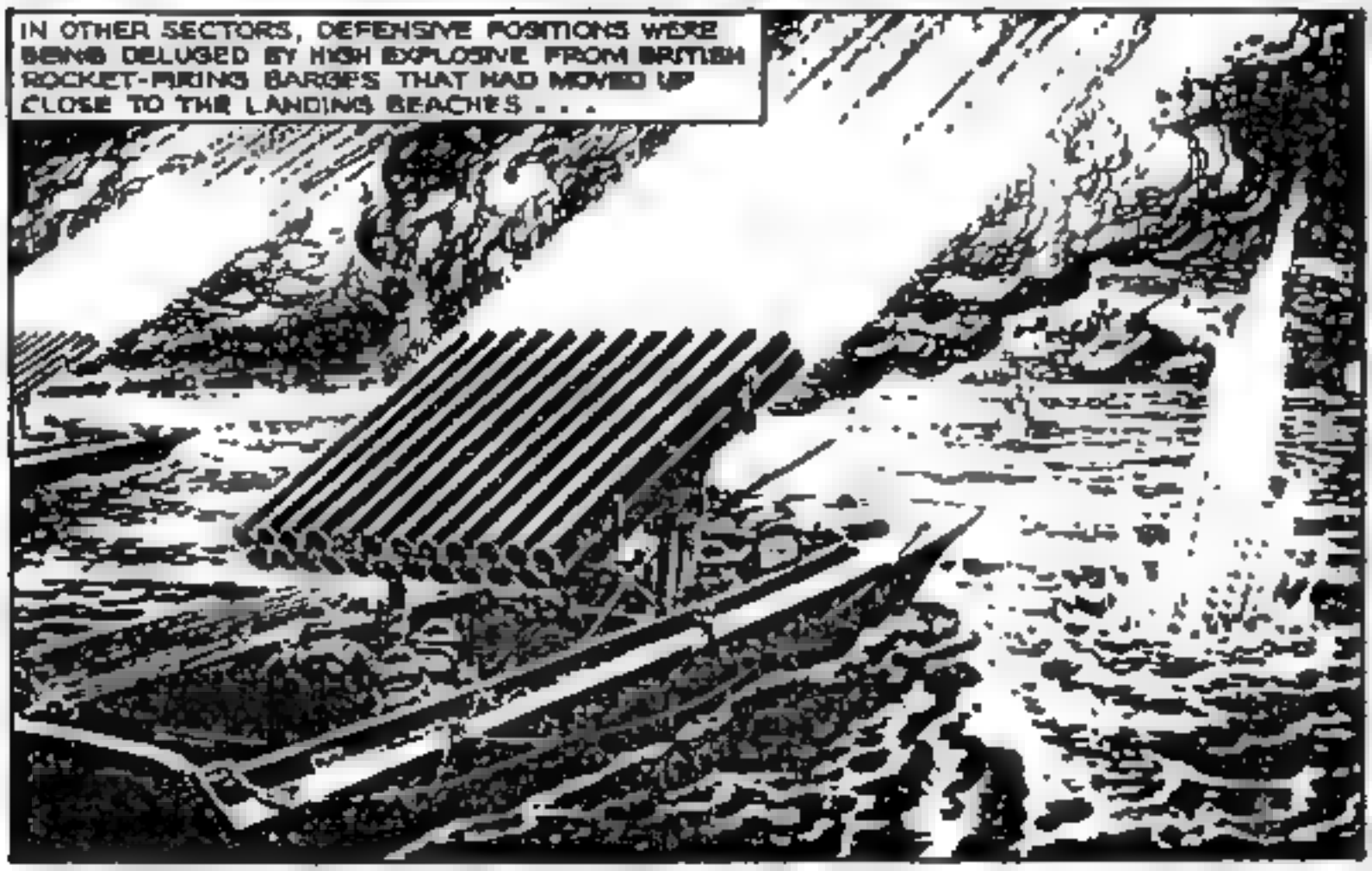
THE SERGEANT'S NERVES LEAPED AS THE T L C. GROUNDED WITH A JOLT. THE RAMP CRASHED DOWN. BLUNDEN SLID HURRIEDLY ON TO HIS HARD LEATHER SEAT IN THE TURRET. CLOSED THE CUPOLA HATCH...

HOW ABOUT KELLY OR DALZIEL GIVING A SQUIRT OR TWO AT THOSE SAUCY SO-AND-SO'S UP THERE IN THE DUNES, SERGEANT?

WHEN I WANT ADVICE FROM YOU, LAWSON, I'LL ASK FOR IT!

ONE SQUADRON HAD BEEN DETACHED FROM THE TANK REGIMENT TO GIVE CLOSE SUPPORT TO THE INFANTRY ON THIS BEACH. THE OTHER SHERMANS OF THE SQUADRON WERE ALREADY CLANKING OVER THE ROCKS AND SAND, HELPING TO DEAL WITH POCKETS OF RESISTANCE...

AS IT TURNED OUT, HOWEVER, THE RESISTANCE WAS QUICKLY OVERCOME. THE DEFENDERS WERE ITALIANS – GOOD MEN WHEN THEY FOUGHT IN A JUST CAUSE, BUT WITH NO MIND TO DIE FOR MUSSOLINI OR HITLER . . .
ALL RIGHT, LADS! HOLD YOUR FIRE! THEY'RE GIVING UP!


IN OTHER SECTORS, DEFENSIVE POSITIONS WERE BEING DELUGED BY HIGH EXPLOSIVE FROM BRITISH ROCKET-FIRING BARGES THAT HAD MOVED UP CLOSE TO THE LANDING BEACHES . . .

SALVOS STONKED ACROSS SLIT-TRENCH SYSTEMS MANNED BY NAZI UNITS—MORE FANATICAL THAN THEIR ITALIAN COUNTERPARTS . . .
AAAARGH!

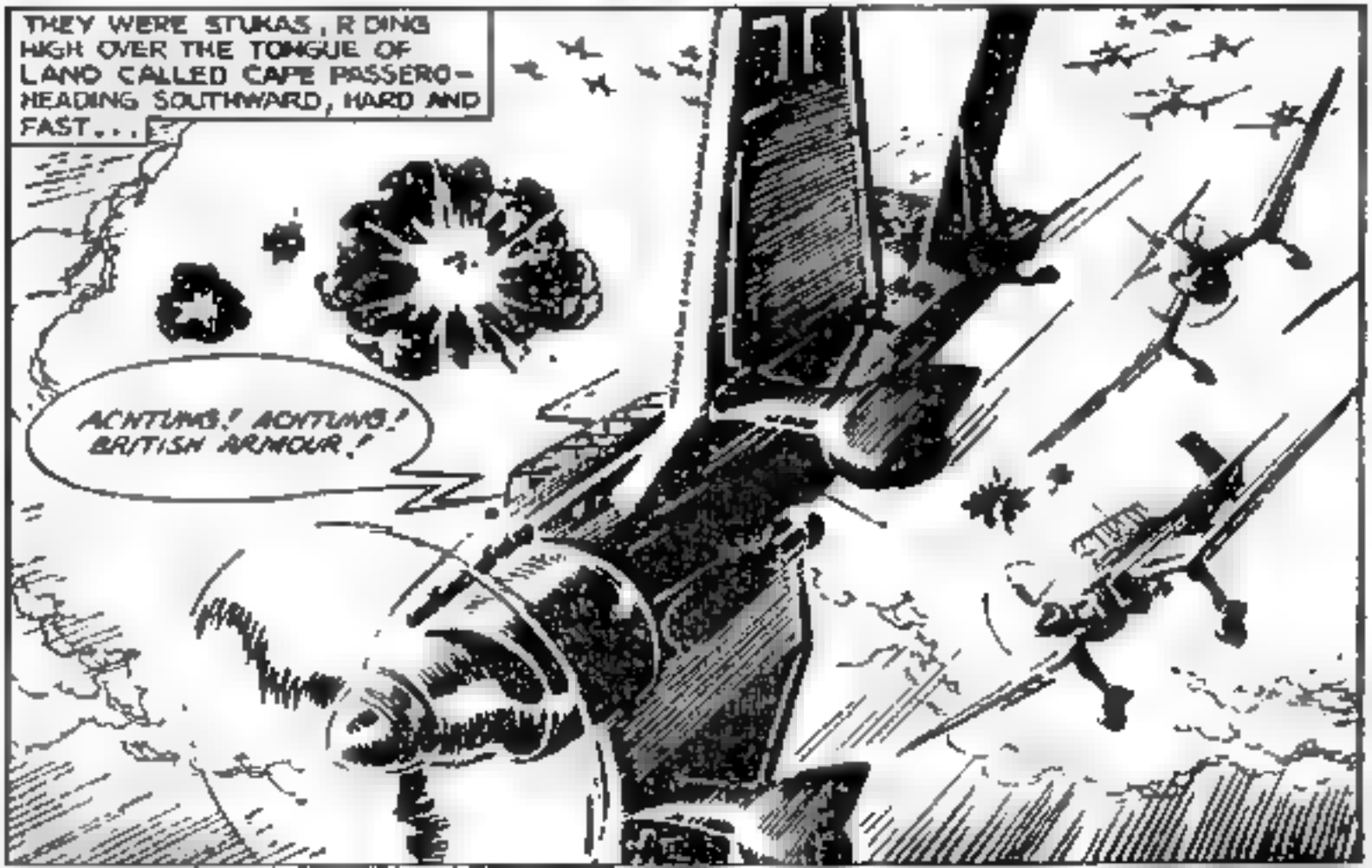
AND BATTLESHIPS OF THE INVADING FLEET POUNDED SPECIFIED TARGETS—OBLITERATING THEM . . .
HUMMEL! LETS GET OUT OF HERE, HANS! THIS IS NO PLACE TO BE—ESPECIALLY WITH A TRUCK-LOAD OF AMMUNITION!

BY DAWN, THE BRITISH SEABORNE FORCES WERE FIRMLY ESTABLISHED ON GROUND SEIZED AGAINST MINIMUM OPPOSITION...
WELL, THAT SKIRMISH DIDN'T AMOUNT TO MUCH—
YOU'RE RIGHT, SERGEANT. BUT AS I'VE JUST BEEN TELLING MISTER JENNINGS, THERE'S A DARKER SIDE TO THE PICTURE...

BLUNDEN AND HIS CREW STARTED TO RISE AS THEY RECOGNISED MAJOR FOLLETT, COMMANDING THE SQUADRON WHICH INCLUDED LIEUTENANT JENNINGS' TROOP...
NO, DON'T BOTHER TO GET UP. THIS ISN'T A PARADE...
YOU SAID SOMETHING ABOUT A DARKER SIDE TO THE PICTURE, SIR?

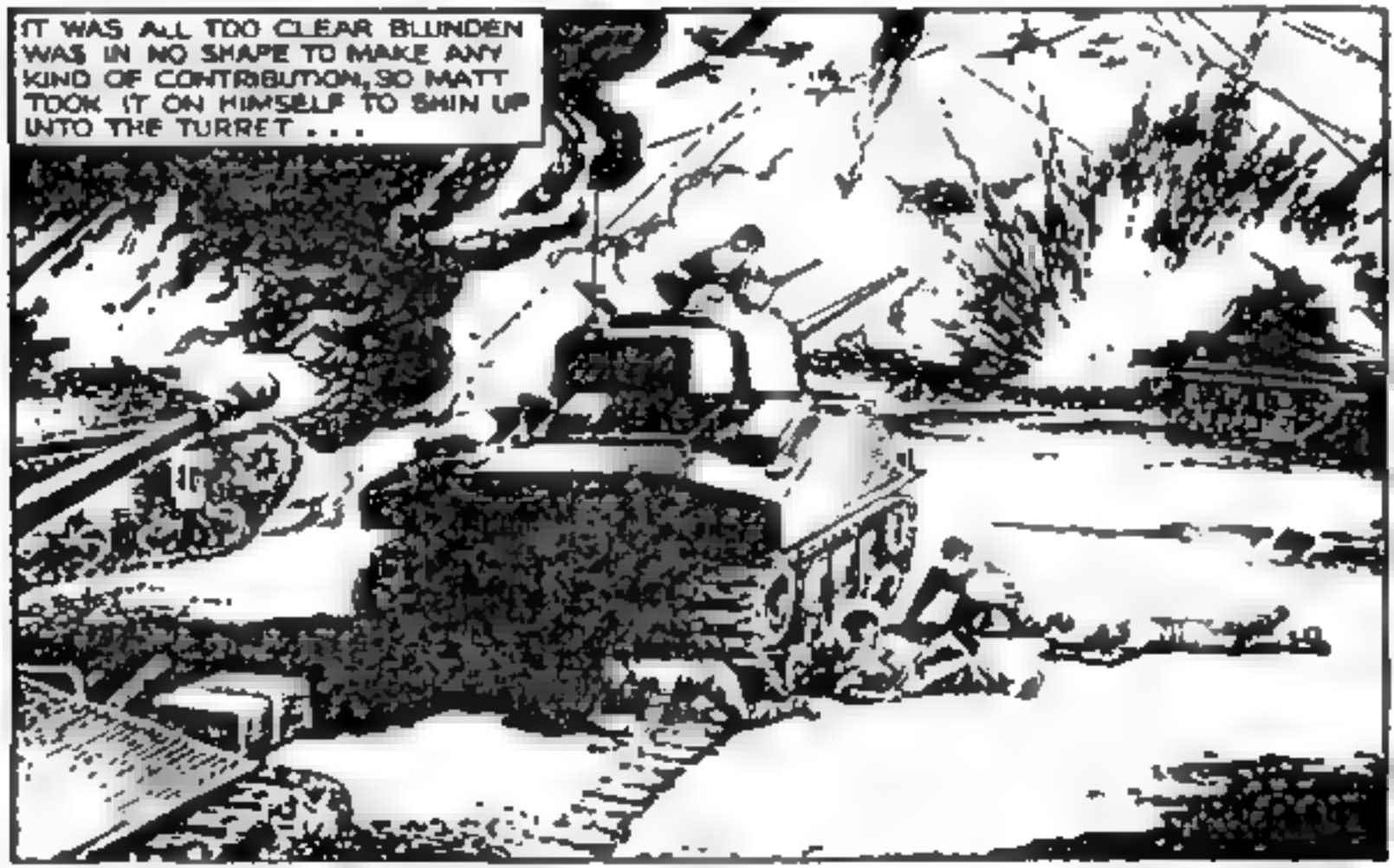
THERE WAS A HINT OF UNEASINESS IN THE SERGEANT'S VOICE. IT WENT UNNOTICED EXCEPT BY MATT LAWSON...
IT SEEMS THE AIRBORNE FORCES SUFFERED PUNISHING LOSSES. THAT MEANS WE CAN EXPECT TOUGH RESISTANCE AS WE THRUST INLAND — STRONG ENEMY COUNTER-ATTACKS AND PLENTY OF HARD FIGHTING.
BLUNDEN DOESN'T LOOK SO SMUG NOW, AND THAT'S A FACT!

FOLLETT'S SQUADRON HAD ITS FIRST SAMPLE OF VENOMOUS ENEMY REACTION BEFORE EVER A START WAS MADE INLAND. THE SUN HAD HARDLY RISEN WHEN THE SKY WAS SPECKLED WITH A LUFTWAFFE FORMATION—FROM AN AIRFIELD THAT BRITISH AND AMERICAN PARATROOPERS HAD BEEN UNABLE TO REACH . . .
JERRY PLANES! CROWDS OF 'EM!


THEY WERE STUKAS, RIDING HIGH OVER THE TONGUE OF LAND CALLED CAPE PASSERO—HEADING SOUTHWARD, HARD AND FAST . . .
ACHTUNG! ACHTUNG! BRITISH ARMOUR!

Clash of Steel

A BOMB WHISTLED THROUGH THE AIR — HIT WITH AN EAR-SHATTERING DETONATION THAT BLASTED ONE SHERMAN INTO SCRAP-IRON AND ANNIHILATED ITS CREW . . .
BLUNDEN OUGHT TO BE BEHIND OUR ACK-ACK BROWNING . . .

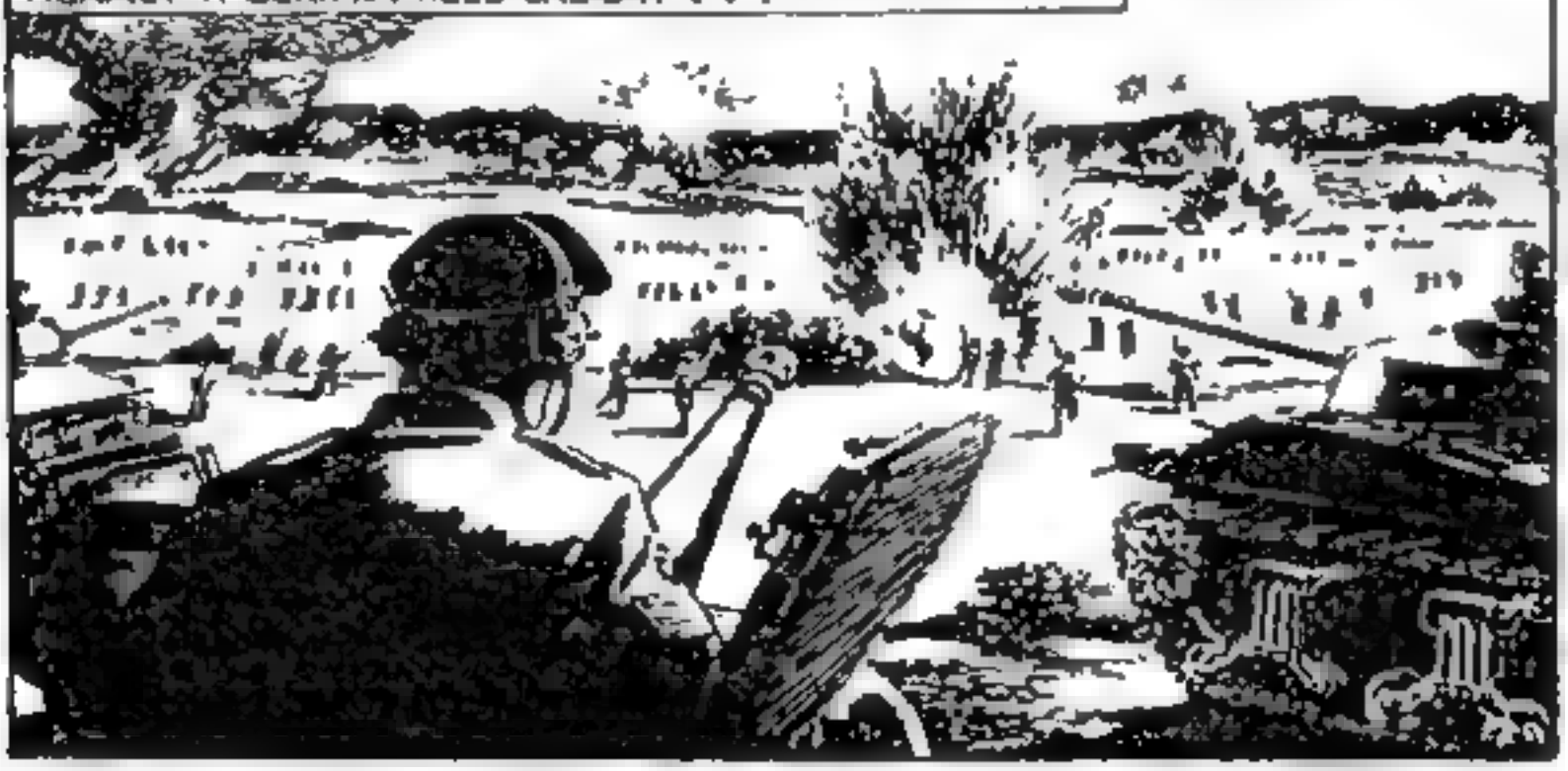

IT WAS ALL TOO CLEAR BLUNDEN WAS IN NO SHAPE TO MAKE ANY KIND OF CONTRIBUTION, SO MATT TOOK IT ON HIMSELF TO SHIN UP UNTO THE TURRET . . .

THE STUKAS WERE SWOOPING INTO A CURTAIN OF FIRE THAT SPELLED DISASTER FOR TWO OF THEM AND THREW THE OTHERS OFF THEIR AIM...
LAWSON'S THE ONLY MAN AMONG US WHO'S KEPT HIS HEAD! HE'S THE ONE WHO OUGHT TO BE OUR N.C.O. — NOT THAT SLOB BLUNDEN!

MATT WAS STARING AFTER THE GERMAN DIVE BOMBERS WHEN BLUNDEN'S VOICE SOUNDED CLOSE TO HIM... A VOICE AS SULLEN AS IT WAS HOARSE...
ALL RIGHT, LAWSON. GET DOWN OUT OF MY TURRET...

Chapter 4. THE HIDDEN KILLER

EXPECT HARD FIGHTING FOLLETT HAD SAID, HE WAS RIGHT. AND THE CREWS OF JENNINGS TROOP HAD EARLY EXPERIENCE OF IT WHEN THEY WERE DIVERTED FROM THE SQUADRON AND ASSIGNED TO AN INFANTRY BATTALION FOR AN ATTACK AGAINST A GERMAN-HELD SALIENT . . .



FROM POSITIONS IN RESERVE, THE MEN OF THE TANK TROOP WATCHED SPELL BOUND AS TWO FORWARD-COMPANIES OF THAT BATTALION ADVANCED THROUGH A BLUDGEONING BARRAGE OF SHELLS AND MORTAR BOMBS . . .

THE BARRAGE LIFTED. THE TATTERED REMNANTS OF THE INFANTRY ASSAULT-COMPANIES RAISED A YELL, AND STARTED A RUSH FOR THEIR OBJECTIVE, A LINE OF SLITS AND WEAPON-PITS . . .
COME ON, LADS! GET STUCK INTO 'EM!

THE ENEMY'S FRONT HAD BEEN SAVAGED BY A PRELIMINARY BOMBARDMENT BUT EVEN SO, COAL-SCUTTLE HELMETS BOBBED THERE IN OMINOUS ACTIVITY, AND NAZI MACHINE-GUNS AND RIFLES OPENED UP . . .

A COUPLE OF FAST-FIRING SPANDAUS TOOK HEAVY TOLL AND PINNED THE ATTACKERS TO THE GROUND . . .
SEND A MESSAGE BACK TO BATTALION HEADQUARTERS. REPORT THAT WE'RE HELD UP — SOMETHING MUST BE DONE ABOUT THOSE MACHINE-GUNS. IT'S TIME TO USE A COUPLE OF THE SHERMANS THAT ARE ON CALL . . .

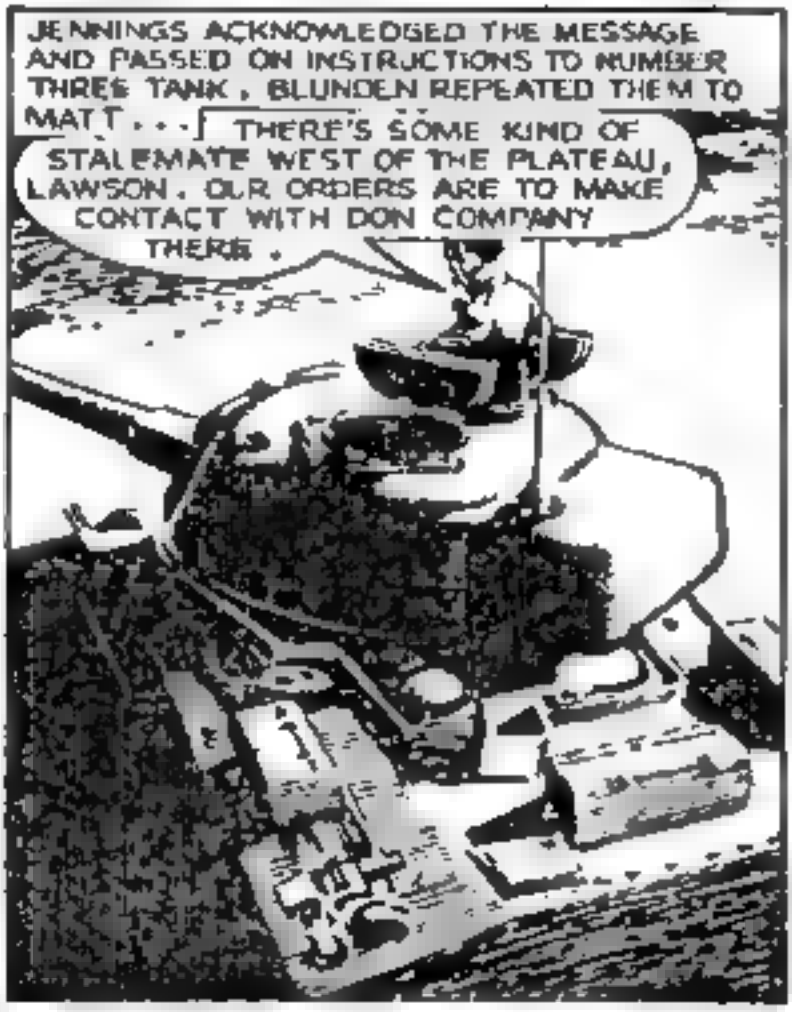
THE MESSAGE TO BATTALION HEADQUARTERS PRODUCED RAPID RESULTS. THE GIST OF IT WAS PASSED TO LIEUTENANT JENNINGS. HE MOVED FROM RESERVE WITH HIS OWN TANK AND NUMBER TWO OF HIS TROOP . . .
.. AND YOU STAY PUT, SERGEANT BLUNDEN, IN CASE YOU'RE NEEDED FOR ANY SUBSIDIARY TASK. CORPORAL BAXTER AND I SHOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE THIS JOB BETWEEN US . . .

THE SHERMANS COMMANDED BY JENNINGS AND BAXTER THUNDERED OVER THE CHEWED-UP GROUND THAT LAY BETWEEN THEM AND THE GERMAN POSITIONS. ENEMY SMALL-ARMS' FIRE SWITCHED TO THEM . . .

IMPLACABLY THE IRONCLADS DROVE ONWARD, BARBED WITH THE WICKED BLUE FLASHES AS NAZI BULLETS GLANCED INEFFECTUALLY FROM THEIR HULLS AND TURRETS. ALL AT ONCE THEIR BROWNINGS LASHED OUT IN WITHERING RESPONSE . . .

THE SPANDAUS WERE ELIMINATED AND THE OBJECTIVE WAS CARRIED. A THIRD RIFLE-COMPANY OF THE BATTALION WAS BROUGHT UP, TO LEAP-FROG BEYOND AND CONTINUE THE ADVANCE AGAINST A SECOND LINE OF ENEMY DEFENCE . . .
I AM OFFIZIER! I AM MAJOR! I DEMAND YOU SHOW RESPECT, ENGLANDER!
DON'T YOU COME THE OLD ACID WITH ME OR I'LL FETCH YOU A FOURPENNY ONE ON THE HOOTER, MATE. YOU COULD BE A BLOOMING GENERAL FOR ALL I CARE. YOU'RE IN THE BAG, SEE? SO GET WEAVING!

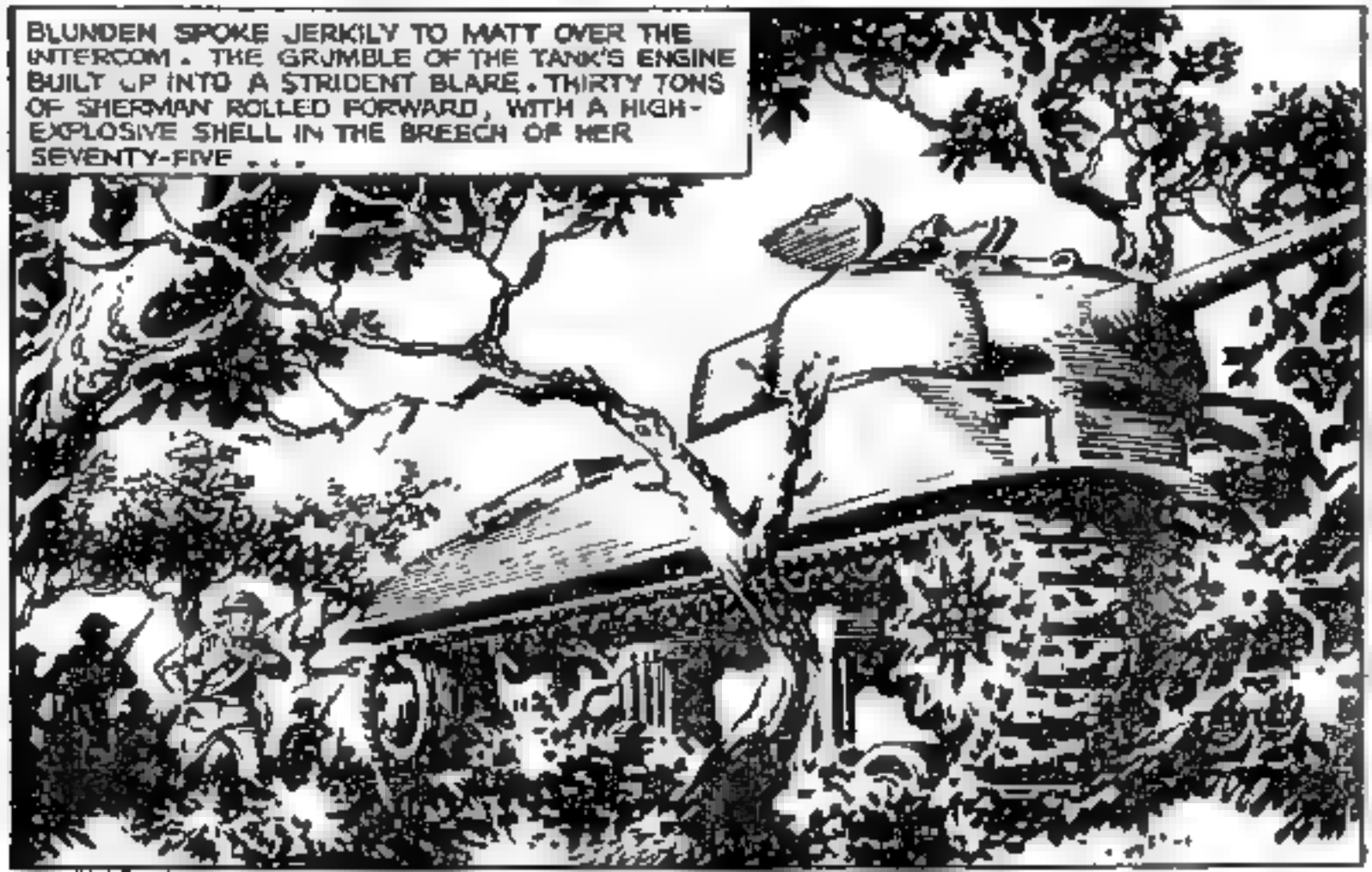
JENNINGS BEAMED AT THE SPECTACLE OF A STIFF-NECKED NAZI PRANCING INTO HOP-SCOTCH AGILITY AT THE PROD OF A BAYONET. THEN THE VOICE OF THE BRITISH INFANTRY BATTALION'S COMMANDER REACHED HIM . . .
MY PERSONAL THANKS TO YOU, JENNINGS. BUT DON COMPANY ON THE LEFT FLANK HAS RUN INTO TROUBLE. CAN YOU SEND ONE OF YOUR TROOP TO ASSIST? OVER.


JENNINGS ACKNOWLEDGED THE MESSAGE AND PASSED ON INSTRUCTIONS TO NUMBER THREE TANK, BLUNDEN REPEATED THEM TO MATT . . .
THERE'S SOME KIND OF STALEMATE WEST OF THE PLATEAU, LAWSON. OUR ORDERS ARE TO MAKE CONTACT WITH DON COMPANY THERE.

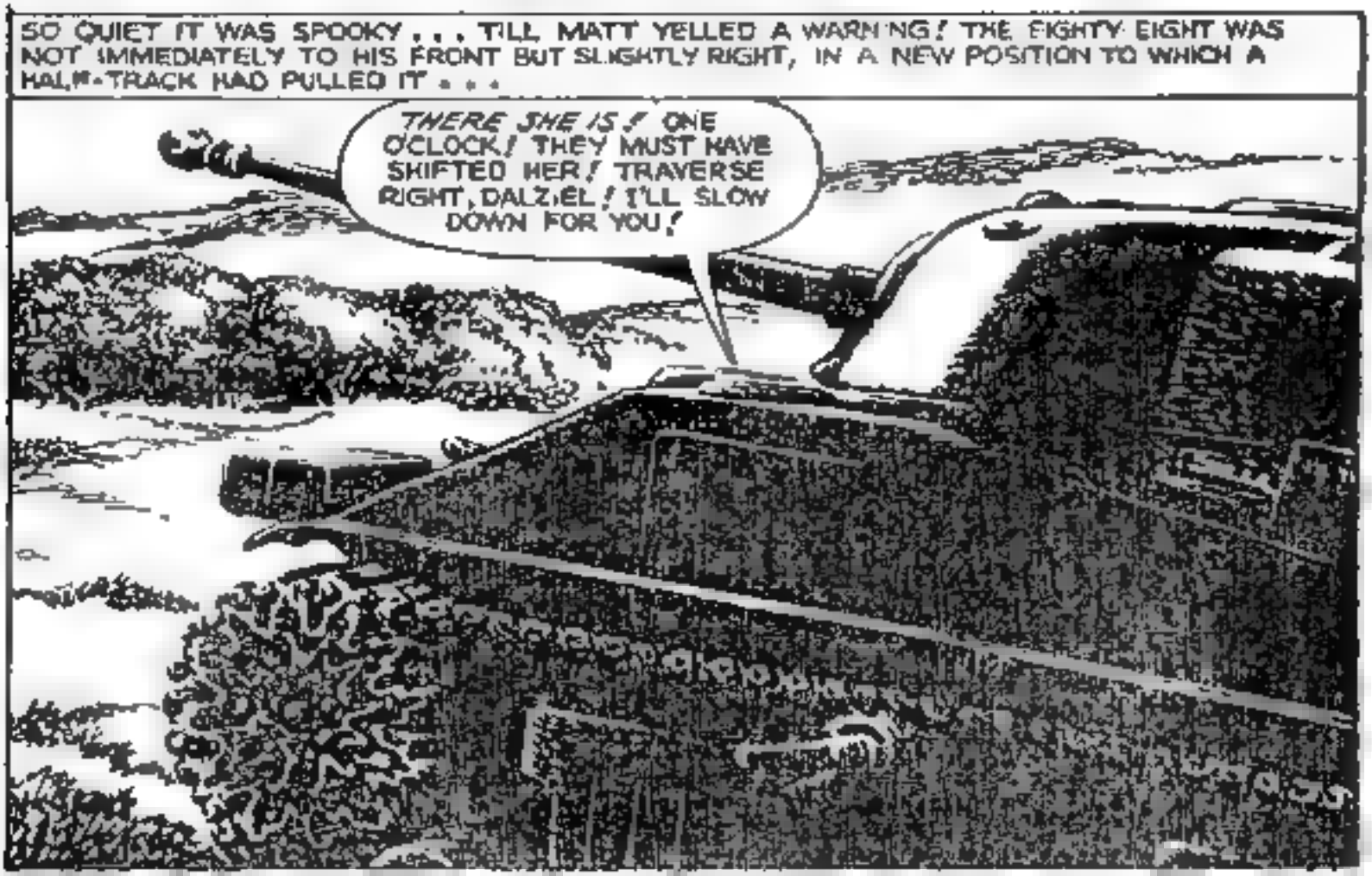
THE SHERMAN SWUNG WESTWARD. MINUTES LATER SHE WAS BEHIND A STRIP OF FOREST AND CLOSE TO THE HEADQUARTERS GROUP OF DON COMPANY...
WE'VE LOST THIRTY PER CENT OF OUR STRENGTH ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS WOOD. THE ENEMY HAS IT COVERED WITH SPANDAUS — AND AN EIGHTY-EIGHT MILLIMETRE GUN.

A MUSCLE TWITCHED IN BLUNDEN'S CHEEK. SPANDAUS DID NOT BOTHER HIM OVERMUCH IN HIS TURRET, BUT HE HAD HEARD FRIGHTENING STORIES OF THE HITTING-POWER OF AN EIGHTY-EIGHT . . .
THE GUN'S THE TOUGH NUT YOU'LL HAVE TO CRACK BEFORE YOU LATCH ON TO THE SPANDAU, SERGEANT. WHEN I GIVE THE WORD, MOVE AHEAD THE WAY YOU'RE POINTING NOW AND YOU'LL BE LINED UP ON THAT KILLER.

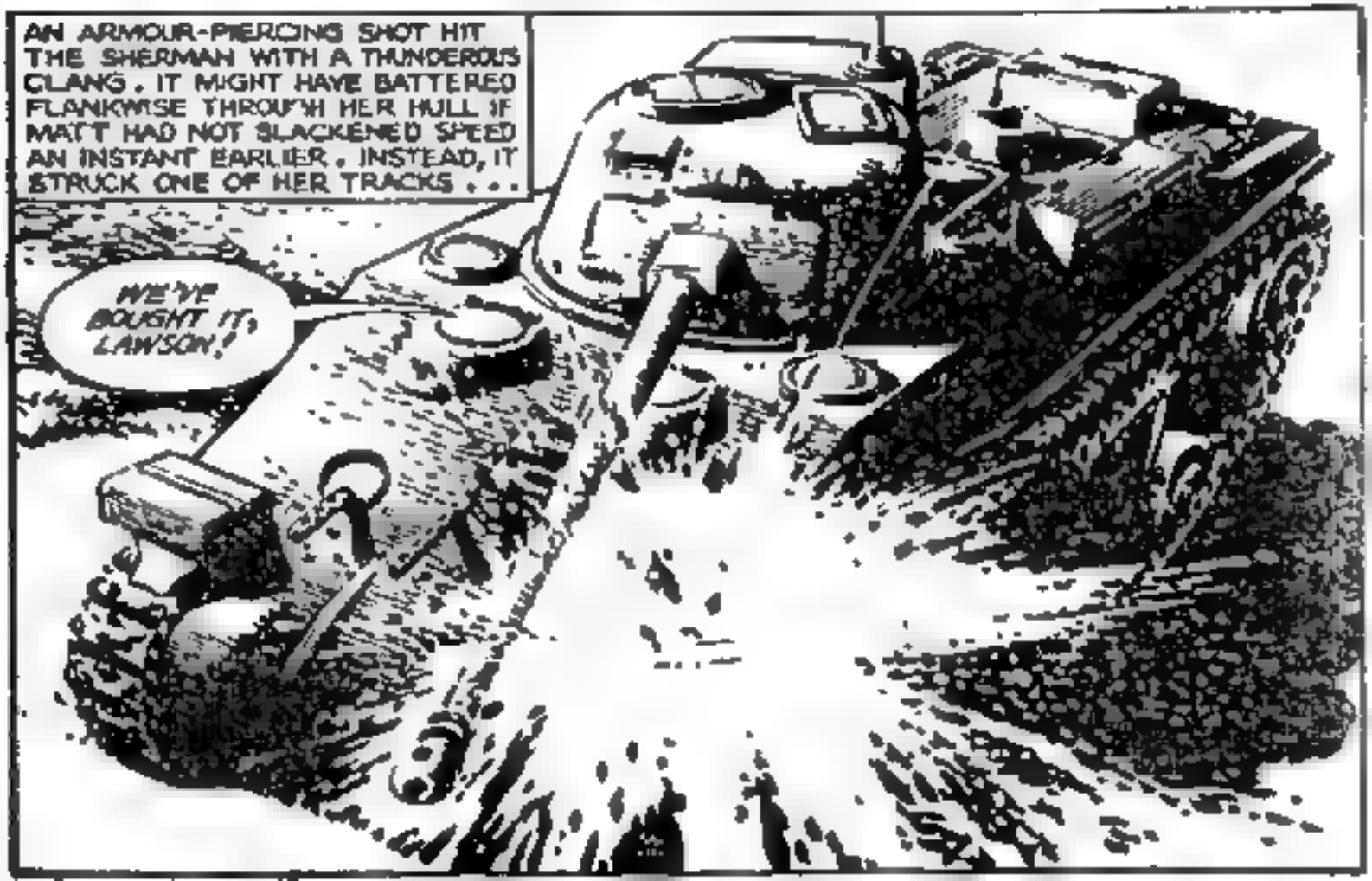
THE COMPANY COMMANDER ISSUED DETAILED ORDERS FOR AN ASSAULT SPEAR-HEADED BY THE SHERMAN. MINUTES DRAGGED BY — MINUTES THAT SEEMED AGE-LONG TO BLUNDEN...
ALL RIGHT, SERGEANT! AWAY YOU GO!


BLUNDEN SPOKE JERKILY TO MATT OVER THE INTERCOM. THE GRUMBLE OF THE TANK'S ENGINE BUILT UP INTO A STRIDENT BLARE. THIRTY TONS OF SHERMAN ROLLED FORWARD, WITH A HIGH-EXPLOSIVE SHELL IN THE BREECH OF HER SEVENTY-FIVE...

SHE CLEARED THE TREES. THROUGH THEIR PERISCOPES THE CREW SCANNED THE TERRAIN BEFORE THEM. BUT NO ENEMY WAS VISIBLE...
I DON'T SEE A TRACE OF ANY EIGHTY-EIGHT, SERGEANT — NOR OF ANYTHING ELSE ON THAT RIDGE.
IT'S ALL TOO QUIET FOR MY LIKING...


SO QUIET IT WAS SPOOKY... TILL MATT YELLED A WARNING! THE EIGHTY-EIGHT WAS NOT IMMEDIATELY TO HIS FRONT BUT SLIGHTLY RIGHT, IN A NEW POSITION TO WHICH A HALF-TRACK HAD PULLED IT...
THERE SHE IS! ONE O'CLOCK! THEY MUST HAVE SHIFTED HER! TRAVERSE RIGHT, DALZIEL! I'LL SLOW DOWN FOR YOU!

HE REALISED HE'D TAKEN THE INITIATIVE – WITHOUT WAITING FOR BLUNDEN, WHO WAS SPEECHLESS ANYWAY. BUT BEFORE DALZIEL COULD FASTEN ON TO THE TARGET A RED FLASH SPAT FROM THE TREES . . .
FEUR!


AN ARMOUR-PIERCING SHOT HIT THE SHERMAN WITH A THUNDEROUS CLANG. IT MIGHT HAVE BATTERED FLANKWISE THROUGH HER HULL IF MATT HAD NOT SLACKENED SPEED AN INSTANT EARLIER. INSTEAD, IT STRUCK ONE OF HER TRACKS . . .
WE'VE BOUGHT IT, LAWSON!

THE STRICKEN TANK SLEWED DOWN INTO A NEARBY HOLLOW. A GRINDING AND CRUNCHING OF METAL ALONG HER SIDE TOLD MATT THE TRACK HAD BEEN DISTORTED . . .
WE'D BETTER PILE OUT AND SEE HOW BADLY SHE'S DAMAGED, KELLY!

A SPANDAU CHATTERED. LEADEN SLUGS BEAT AN UGLY TATTOO ON THE DISABLED SHERMAN. BLUNDEN SKULKED DOWN SMARTLY BUT MATT AND KELLY SCRAMBLED OUT, KELLY SCOOPING UP A STEN THAT WAS PART OF EVERY CO-DRIVER'S EQUIPMENT— AND EVERY TANK COMMANDER'S, TOO . . .

DON COMPANY CAME UNDER FIRE A MOMENT AFTER — FROM THE SPANDAU AND RIFLES THAT THUDDED ALONG THE FRINGE OF THE WOOD IN FRONT. THE EIGHTY-EIGHT GUN SLAMMED AT THE INFANTRY AS WELL, BELCHING OUT HIGH-EXPLOSIVE NOW, NOT ARMOUR PIERCING SHOT...

FLAME-STREAKED GEYSERS OF DIRT FOUNTAINED AMONG THE ADVANCING BRITISH. BULLETS RAKED THEM...

IN THE HOLLOW WHERE THE SHERMAN HAD STALLED LOPSIDEDLY, MATT SANG OUT TO DALZIEL . . .

CAN YOU TAKE A SMACK AT THAT EIGHTY EIGHT WITH THE SEVENTY-FIVE? FAILING THAT, HOW ABOUT SPRAYING THE WOOD AHEAD OF US WITH YOUR BROWNING?

A BRIEF PAUSE, THEN DALZIEL POKED HIS HEAD UP FROM THE TURRET. HE HAD TO ELBOW BLUNDEN ASIDE TO DO IT . . . AND THE INSTANT HE SHOWED HIMSELF THAT SPANDAU SWIVELLED MALIGNANTLY TOWARDS THE SHERMAN AGAIN . . .

NOT A CHANCE, LAWSON! THE WAY WE'RE TILTED, I CAN'T GET A PIK ANYWHERE NEAR THOSE JERRIES!

MEANWHILE THE MEN OF DON COMPANY WERE SUSTAINING HEAVY CASUALTIES. UNSUPPORTED AS THEY WERE, THERE WAS NO HOPE OF PRESSING HOME AN ASSAULT ACROSS THAT DEATH-WHIPPED GROUND. GRIMLY THE MAJOR IN COMMAND OF THEM CALLED A HALT . . .

THEY RETURNED THE ENEMY'S FIRE. BUT THE ADVANTAGE REMAINED WITH THE NAZIS, DUG-IN AND BACKED BY THAT EIGHTY-EIGHT. FOR THE PRESENT, THE STRANDED SHERMAN SEEMED OF NO INTEREST TO THE CREW OF THAT KILLER-GUN...

WE'VE GOT TOOL-KIT AND SPARE LINKS. WE CAN DO A REPAIR JOB ON THIS TRACK AND WE CAN DO IT FAST IF WE ALL WORK AS A TEAM. GIVE THE SERGEANT A SHOUT, KELLY.

KELLY EDGED BACK FROM THE FRONT OF THE CRIPPLED TANK...

LAWSON SAYS WE CAN GET GOING AGAIN, SERGEANT, IF WE ALL PITCH IN AND HELP.

YOU TELL LAWSON TO FORGET IT! WE'LL STAY WHERE WE ARE AND THANK OUR STARS WE'RE STILL ALIVE! THERE'S NO SENSE IN PRESSING OUR LUCK!

DAVE KELLY THREW A GLANCE AT MATT AND SAW HE HAD HEARD. THERE WAS A GLITTER IN MATT'S EYE AND A THRUST TO HIS JAW. AND — SIGNIFICANTLY — WHEN HE CALLED TO THE SERGEANT HE GAVE HIM NO PREFIX OF RANK.

BLUNDEN! WE WERE SENT TO HELP THOSE BLOKES IN DON COMPANY! WE CAN STILL HELP 'EM — AND WE'RE GOING TO! DALZIEL — CLARENCE — HOW ABOUT YOU? ARE *YOU* WILLING TO RISK YOUR SKINS?

A SCUFFLING SOUND REACHED THE EARS OF MATT AND KELLY. BILL DALZIEL SPILLED FROM THE TURRET TONY CLARENCE FOLLOWED — WITH A HESITANCY THAT CHANGED TO ELECTRIFIED AGILITY AS A SWARM OF BULLETS SNAPPED AT HIM!

BLUNDEN DID NOT BUDGE. IN THE BED OF THE HOLLOW, HIS CREW SET TO WORK WITHOUT HIM — MATT PROVIDING THE KNOW-HOW, ISSUING BRISK ORDERS — THE OTHERS OBEYING WITH A PROMPTNESS THAT IMPLIED INTUITIVE RECOGNITION OF HIS LEADERSHIP...
THAT SLEDGEHAMMER, TONY! COME ON, HOP TO IT!

THE TRACK WAS REPAIRED, THE TOOL KIT STOWED AWAY. MATT GAVE THE ORDER TO CLIMB ABOARD — AND THAT WAS WHEN BLUNDEN TRIED TO RESUME COMMAND...
WHAT'S THE IDEA? WHERE D'YOU THINK YOU'RE TAKING THIS TANK? WE'RE NOT MOVING FROM HERE, UNDERSTAND?
YOU'RE WRONG, BLUNDEN! WE'RE SETTLING A SCORE WITH THAT EIGHTY-EIGHT AND WE'RE GETTING DON COMPANY ON TO ITS OBJECTIVE — IF IT'S THE LAST THING WE EVER DO!
THAT'S ABOUT THE STRENGTH OF IT, SERGEANT!
AND YOU NOR ANYBODY ELSE IS GOING TO STOP US, BLUNDEN!

BLUNDEN DID NOT ATTEMPT TO STOP THEM, GREY-FACED WILD OF EYE, HE BALED OUT OF THE TURRET AND DROPPED TO THE DIRT AS A SPURT OF TRACER ZIPPED PAST THE CUPOLA...
YOU'RE OUT OF YOUR MINDS, ALL OF YOU! GO ON, YOU FOOLS— GET YOURSELVES WIPED OUT! BUT YOU NEEDN'T THINK I'M SETTING MYSELF UP TO BE A DEAD HERO ALONG WITH YOU! NOT ME!

IT WAS THEN THAT THE STACCATO BLATTER OF A SCHMEISSER MACHINE PISTOL ECHOED THROUGH THE HOLLOW . . .
AAAGH!

DALZIEL SNATCHED AT HIS SERVICE REVOLVER. INSTANTLY, THE SCHMEISSER'S BARREL SHIFTED TO HIM. BUT THE NAZI WAS BEATEN TO THE TRIGGER . . . BY KELLY . . . KELLY, SO LONG AND SO HEARTILY DISLIKED BY DALZIEL . . .
TH THANKS, DAVE!

NEVER BEFORE HAD DALZIEL CALLED KELLY BY HIS FIRST NAME. KELLY WAS QUICK TO NOTICE HIS SPONTANEOUS USE OF IT NOW. BUT THIS WAS NO TIME TO DWELL ON THE CIRCUMSTANCE. MATT SAW TO THAT . . .
BLUNDEN'S HAD IT! HE'S DEAD! DALZIEL — CLARENCE — GET IN THE TURRET, QUICK! KELLY, TAKE OVER AS DRIVER!

THE FOUR OF THEM CLAMBERED SWIFTLY INTO THE TANK, MATT FILLING-IN FOR THE SERGEANT WHO HAD FAILED THEM SO IGNOMINIOUSLY. THE ENGINE WHINED, THEN ROARED IN FULL VOICE. THE SHERMAN LURCHED FROM THE HOLLOW, MENACINGLY — AND INTO THE THICK OF A NAZI ONRUSH!
NOW WE KNOW WHY THAT HUN SHOWED UP SO UNEXPECTED-LIKE AND KNOCKED OFF BLUNDEN! THE JERRIES ARE PUTTING IN A COUNTER-ATTACK ON WHAT'S LEFT OF DON COMPANY, LAWSON! BOY, WHAT I COULD DO TO 'EM WITH THIS BROWNING!
NEVER MIND THE BROWNING, DALZIEL! CRACK DOWN ON THAT EIGHTY-EIGHT FIRST — AND THEN ON THE SPANDAU!

A MONSTROUS CLAMOUR FILLED THE TANK AS HER SEVENTY-FIVE GAVE TONGUE — HAMMERING AT THE EIGHTY-EIGHT BEFORE THE ENEMY GUNNERS COULD ZERO ON TO HER AND CHANGE BACK TO ARMOUR PIERCING SHOT . . .

COME ON, CLARENCE! IT'S YOUR JOB TO LOAD! DO YOUR STUFF!

OKAY, DALZIEL . . . OKAY . . . DON'T RATTLE ME . . .

A SECOND SHELL FROM THE SEVENTY FIVE BLOTTED OUT THE NAZI ARTILLERYMEN AND THEIR GUN. WITH THE SHERMAN ROCKING BACK ON HER FRONT SUSPENSION, DALZIEL TRAVERSED AT MATT'S DIRECTIONS — HIS TARGET THE SPANDAU NOW . . .

A BULL'S EYE! ALL RIGHT, NOW WE START BEATING UP THE JERRIES OUT HERE IN THE OPEN!

THE SURVIVORS OF DON COMPANY WERE ENGAGING THE NAZIS WITH RIFLES, BRENS AND STENS. IT ONLY NEEDED THE SECONDARY ARMAMENT OF THE TANK TO KNOCK THE HEART OUT OF THE ENEMY'S COUNTER-ATTACK . . .

ENGINE SNARLING, THE SHERMAN RAMPAGED OVER THE BATTLEGROUND AND STITCHED THE AIR WITH SQUIRTS OF TRACER. SHE COMPLETED HER MISSION BY ADDING TO THE TALLY OF PRISONERS . . .

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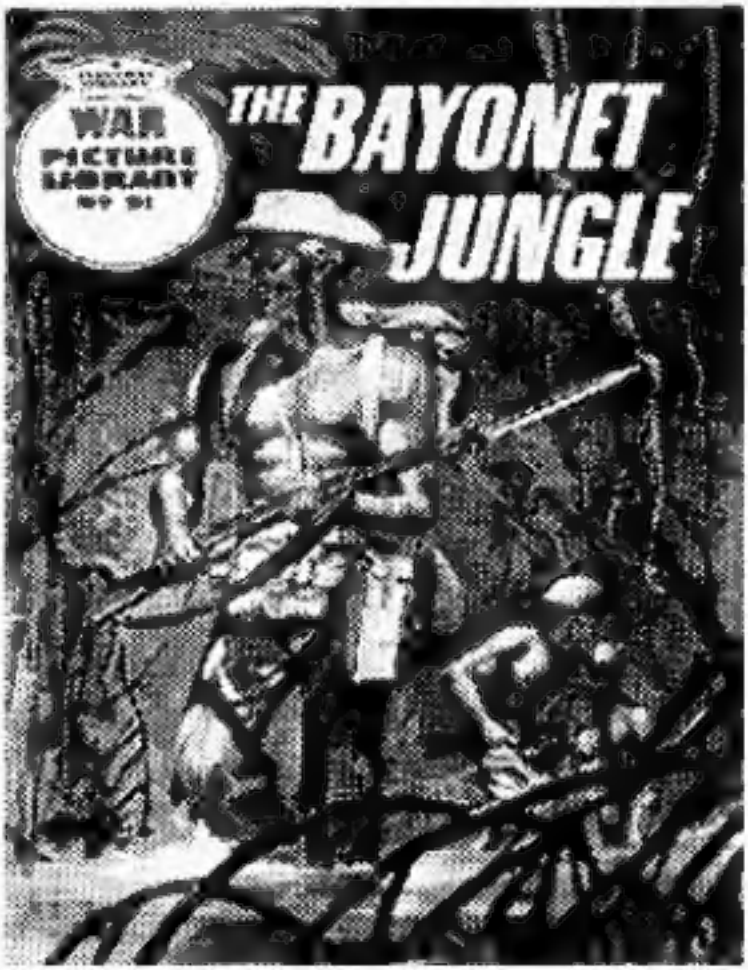

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